







NEWS OF ENGLAND  
or A Country Without a Hero

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# NEWS OF ENGLAND

*or*

## A Country Without a Hero

*by*

BEVERLEY NICHOLS



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*For*  
*FRANCIS YEATS-BROWN*  
*Bengal Lancer*

*Dear Y-B,*

*There was a day when you disagreed so strongly with one of my books that you honoured me by writing a reply to it. Across the cover of that book was printed in large letters, ‘Beverley Nichols Refuted’.*

*I wish that on the cover of this book I might return the compliment, and write ‘Yeats-Brown Refuted’. But ‘News of England’, far from being a refutation of your philosophy, is in some ways an endorsement of it. That, at least, is how it seems to me. You are too generous a man to say ‘I told you so’. The fact remains that you did, and I am glad to have the opportunity of here acknowledging it.*

*As ever,*  
*B. N.*



NEWS OF ENGLAND  
or A Country Without a Hero



## CHAPTER I

# A COUNTRY WITHOUT A HERO

### 1

A GREY cloak, a brace of greyhounds, a pair of gilt spurs, a pound of cumin, a salmon spear, a pair of white gloves, a hundred shillings and a pound of pepper . . . these are the gifts which, in the year 1938, are still presented to King George VI of England on his visit to the Duchy of Cornwall.

He travels from London by one of the speediest trains in the world. It flies through a country that even his father would hardly recognize, so quickly are the old landmarks passing. As he receives these feudal dues, which seem to have been brought not only from another civilization but from another world, the fastest bombers in Europe dip in salute, high above him. But still the ancient gifts are laid at his feet . . . a grey cloak, a brace of greyhounds, a pair of gilt spurs.

It is not merely a picturesque anachronism. It is a highly significant trait in the national character, that character which clings steadfastly to ancient forms, long after the realities which moulded them have been forgotten, and long after the spirit which inspired them has died away.

It is as significant as the bunch of newly-cut flowers which the Recorder of London always carries with him as, in his scarlet robe, he enters the court of the Old Bailey to administer the law of the land. The fragrance of those

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flowers drifts back through the centuries, to the time when the stench of the wicked was so overpowering that the delicate nostrils of the court were offended, and sought protection in the pinks and lavenders which might then be plucked not so very far away, in the fields of Lincoln's Inn.

To-day, the prisoner at the bar has had a bath, whether he likes it or not. The court is air-conditioned and centrally heated. But the flowers remain in the hand of the Recorder, apparently fadeless; a symbol of the unbroken continuity of English law.

It is this almost passionate adherence to the language of the past, at the very moment when we are thinking in the language of the future (and often determining the cadences of that language), this obstinate practice of pouring our new wine into old bottles, which makes England the despair of foreign observers. A country which so persistently says one thing and does another is inexplicable. Worse than inexplicable. *Perfidie*.

At the same time, it is exceedingly interesting. More interesting to-day than at any time in history.

### I I

In the following pages some effort will be made, however inadequate, to portray some of the chief features which differentiate the England of 1928 from the England of 1938. But before we can do that it will be necessary, very briefly, to obtain some sort of bird's-eye view of the position of England, and the Empire, in relation to the rest of the world. Such a survey, though brief, need not be superficial.

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There are certain facts about that position which are, sad to relate, only too alarmingly obvious.

The position is one of extreme danger. On the material side we have the prospect of an undisciplined nation with a declining population in possession of an utterly unreasonable proportion of the world's riches. This nation, which is led by a committee of dreamers and grandfathers (whose faltering steps are hampered by an irresponsible and ignorant opposition), finds itself confronted by new nations of immense strength, led by young and ruthless men, whose fingers are itching to pick our pockets.

But the material danger is not the greatest danger. It is true that our armaments are (and always must be) ludicrously insufficient to defend our territories, but that, after all, is a risk we share with all other nations, great or small. There is no real defence against modern armaments . . . a dozen lunatics let loose in the air might paralyse the heart of an Empire. It is also true that the most startling rise in our birth-rate would still leave vast tracts of our Empire unpopulated for centuries, but that, again, is a problem we share with other countries. We have long accustomed ourselves to the paradox of dictators who, at the very time that they are demanding territories to accommodate their 'teeming millions' are also urging those teeming millions to reproduce themselves faster and faster, and are offering them every sort of inducement to do so.

These problems, which are common to every great power (though with us they are to be seen in their most acute stage), might be settled by a foreign policy which was animated by a little Christian charity . . . by a foreign policy, in other words, which was sternly realistic (for

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only in Christianity will you find a realism that really works).

They might be settled were it not for the other danger, a danger far greater than an inadequate army or air-force. It is a danger of the spirit which threatens us.

England won the war. England has nothing left to fight for. And as a result, England, to many foreign observers, is like a rich old woman whose sole ideal is to keep what she has got. And even this ideal, in their opinion, she holds somewhat feebly. In the last municipal elections, which affect the individual welfare and the individual pocket almost as closely as the national elections, 64·6 per cent did not even trouble to vote. In spite of every possible facility, in spite of an army of free cars, and a national press campaign, urging upon every man and woman the importance of registering his vote, only 704,832 people went to the polls, and the remaining 1,253,034 just couldn't be bothered. It is a strange reflection on the mentality of the nation which, throughout history, has been held up to the other nations as a pattern of representative government!

England, it would appear, no longer cares about England. With equanimity the majority of the population has witnessed the destruction of London, and its transformation into the shoddiest capital in the world. With hardly a protest we have assisted at the desecration of the countryside, till every other village is an advertisement of the fact that we are not only a nation of shopkeepers but a nation of usurious vandals.

With sang-froid we tolerate slum conditions which the authoritarian states, with their empty treasuries, would not tolerate for a month. With indifference we accept a chaotic

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and antiquated road-system, which is paralysing our transport and filling our cemeteries.

We shall have so much evidence of this apathy in the later pages that it need not here be stressed. But it should be remembered that this spiritual degeneration is the true explanation of the chaos of our foreign policy, to which we must now revert.

### I I I

There are not many times in the history of nations at peace when it can honestly be said that the majority of the people are moved by a great ideal. It is easy enough to have a great ideal in time of war, in fact, you can hardly have a war without one, even if it has to be manufactured by the War Office (as it usually is). But in time of peace, in a stable country, unmenaced by revolution, great ideals are rare.

That is why the genuine enthusiasm of so many millions of Englishmen for the League of Nations was so remarkable, and why the subsequent collapse of the League left a deeper and more embittering impression than is generally realized.

It is to the failure of our statesmen to admit that collapse (for which they were largely responsible) and to their insistence, even to this day, in treating a phantom as a reality, that we owe half the troubles of modern Europe.

It is easy to be shocked by the flagrant violation of international treaties by Germany. But we forget that German policy is the direct result of a long series of betrayals, by the allied powers, of every pledge which we gave at the end of the war. It would take too long to list these betrayals. One picture must do duty for what could only be accomplished on an immense canvas.

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Last year I happened to be passing from Poland into East Prussia. As I entered the neat little German passport office I saw, hanging on the wall, a remarkable map. It was a pre-Hitler map, dated 1930.

In this map, the various armies, navies and air-forces of Europe were represented by soldiers, ships, guns and aeroplanes, drawn to scale. In the middle of Germany stood a tiny soldier, representing 100,000 men. Round the shores of Germany there were no ships, for her fleet had been sunk. Over the skies of Germany, there was one speck of an aeroplane, and on the frontiers of Germany were two little guns.

But round Germany . . . from France, from Italy, from England, from Russia, Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia and all the rest of them, pointed immense howitzers, forests of bayonets, the guns of mighty fleets. The neighbouring skies were thick with planes. At every vantage point towered soldiers, representing armies which were reckoned by millions.

That was twelve years after we had signed a pledge to disarm. Twelve years after we had demanded the plaudits of posterity by proclaiming our adherence to the principles of international settlement. During those twelve years Germany had passed from crisis to crisis. Those who did not know Germany in 1930, when utter despair was written over the face of the land, when the body of every boy and every girl was for sale for a piece of bread, will never feel the sense of abiding shame and horror that we, in the name of democracy and peace, should have played our part in the torture gang of Versailles.

We created Hitler. At the instigation of France, of course, in whose crazy courses we have obediently followed since the

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war. We made the advent of Hitler not only inevitable but a part of the common justice of things. And with our own hands we broke up the League of Nations.

I have done as much as most English writers to gain popular support for the League. At a time when Japan, Germany and Italy were still members, before the farce of the disarmament conference had been exposed, I considered, as many men of greater eminence considered, that it was vital for all of us to do our utmost to make this international court a reality.

What has happened since then? Japan has bared her teeth, and departed. That was not the League's fault, admittedly, but it did not make the task of the League's friends any easier. A little later Germany, too, departed. That *was* the League's fault, or rather the fault of France and her satellite England, who both persisted in treating the new Germany as a ticket-of-leave convict. The departure of Germany made the task of the League's friends almost impossible. After that came the Italian episode. And instead of realizing, as I and a large number of previous League enthusiasts realized, that the League was dead, and that we must search around for some other means to peace, the astonishing directors of our foreign policy continued for years as though nothing had happened. Italy remained a member of the League. The chief burglar stayed on as one of the chief policemen.

As if this were not enough, we were presented, by France, with the Franco-Soviet pact. This pact, the most grotesque instrument ever forged between two great powers, is an alliance between catholicism and atheism, between capitalism and communism, between radicalism and autocracy. We

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were told, blandly, that it in no way affected the structure of the League. And . . . shades of Palmerston! . . . we pretended to believe it.

Is it any wonder that the English people, compelled to watch these degrading antics on the part of our governments, forced, for lack of an alternative, to assent to a policy which bore a strong resemblance to the whims of an antiquated cocotte, should have turned away in despair, and taken refuge in an apparently permanent mood of embittered isolationism?

In the meantime I, and thousand of others, resigned from the League. I remember, at the time, one of His Majesty's ambassadors observing to me that our foreign policy, for years, had been inspired by the same spirit that animated a certain charming but eccentric old gentleman, the late Imperial Russian ambassador to Rumania. For years he had sat in a threadbare embassy in Bukarest, issuing Imperial decrees, as though the Tsar were still holding court in Petrograd. Everybody loved him in Bukarest, so they let him go his way. They allowed him to stay in his embassy, stamping illusory documents, issuing valueless passports, settling points of etiquette which were as dead as the eagle which had once fluttered on the Imperial standards. And all the time, in the next street, the ambassador of the Soviets chuckled and thumbed his nose at this decrepit old man who was so eloquent an example of the decadence of the old regime.

There is only one difference between this old man and ourselves. He at least was harmless. But we, by burying our head in the sand, are endangering not only our own Empire but the peace of the whole world.

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### I V

It is necessary to insist, *ad nauseam*, on the lunacy of a pro-League policy in these latter years, long after the League has ceased to exist. It is necessary for the simple reason that a large proportion of the British public are sunk in such apathy and indifference that they do not realize it. If we had a foreign secretary who persistently walked to Downing Street without his coat, waistcoat, trousers, socks, and shoes we should justifiably regard him as eccentric. But we do not appear to regard him as at all eccentric when he persists in referring to a discredited rump of French satellites as though it were an international body. Nor do we appear to mind when he takes his orders from the aforesaid rump.<sup>1</sup>

We have had so many shocks, since the war, that we seem to think that this is a perfectly normal situation. Actually, of course, it is so fantastic that future historians, poring over yellowing documents in an effort to form a final verdict on the Decline and Fall of the British Empire, will rub their eyes and say, ‘There must be some other explanation, some subtle, secret thing which caused this madness. After all, the men who had charge of the Empire’s destinies were not, by the ordinary standards of education, half-wits. They were not, by the ordinary standards of morality, rogues. And yet . . . look at what they did!’

Look at it! Consider one delicate example, the recognition of Abyssinia.

I am writing at the beginning of 1938. It is exactly one year and eight months since the last remnants of the Abyssinian army were dispersed, and the Emperor, broken in

<sup>1</sup> This was, of course, written before the resignation of Mr. Anthony Eden.

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spirit but still carrying with him an aura of majesty, boarded the ship which was to carry him to these shores . . . to carry him, incidentally, to increasing humiliation, poverty and oblivion. Though the deep sympathy of every decent man must be accorded to Haile Selassie, it is yet, in many ways, unfortunate that nature had endowed him with so gracious a physique, such luminous eyes, such delicate tapering fingers. He was of an entirely different mould from his subjects. The world did not realize that. They did not realize that Abyssinia was, in itself, a courtesy expression, and that the Abyssinians were a collection of primitive tribes, cruel, superstitious, riddled with disease. Those few realists who pointed out that Italy was only doing, on a somewhat larger and more efficient scale, what we ourselves had done, time and again, in the past, and that a thorough conquest by a Western power would perhaps in the long run make life safer, healthier and more agreeable for the Abyssinians themselves, were regarded as brutal 'Fascists'.

However, even if the Abyssinians had been of the same stock and culture as their Emperor, it would have made little difference, once the war was won. Though the conquest may not have been complete, though there may be guerrilla warfare for years, Abyssinia, for all practical purposes was Italy's. And nothing but a world war, on a scale that baffles the imagination, would ever change that fact.

It is here that the future historian, examining the aforesaid documents of to-day, will put his hand to his head and say, in bewilderment, 'There must be some mistake'. He will turn to 1938 and find the Abyssinian legation still functioning in London. He will find Abyssinia still 'recognized' by the British Government, long after it has ceased to exist.

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And as he looks at the map he will shake his head and wonder why the British map-makers do not still mark Calais as a British possession. For after all, we owned *that* . . . once!

It is possible that by the time these words are printed, the British Government may have sulkily accepted the inevitable and recognized the Italian conquest. But by then, it will be too late. The harm has been done. Italy has been driven into the arms of Germany, a Fascist block has been formed, and the world has been split into two hostile camps.

You will search in vain through English history to find any period of our foreign policy which can offer even a faint parallel to the ineptitude and criminal negligence which has characterized the conduct of our affairs in this matter.

### v

It was suggested, on a previous page, that a little practical Christianity might have saved our statesmen from some of their worst errors. It should not be necessary to elaborate this thesis, but since Christianity is still, to a large proportion of our population, a creed of vague and impossible beauty, bearing little or no relation to modern affairs, we might spend a moment to show that it is at least a good deal more 'realistic' than the policies which have brought us to our present pass.

If you examine, with impartial eye, the principal crises which have been precipitated, since the war, by England (at the direction, of course, of France), you will find, in nine cases out of ten, that they have been brought about by a flouting of the elementary principles of Christianity.

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Take the economic debacle of the early 'twenties, ending in the collapse of the mark and the loss, to English investors, of many millions. All that might have been averted if the big-wigs of Versailles had placed before them, on the treaty tables, a very simple and uncompromising text from the New Testament —

'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'

The classic essay of J. M. Keynes, which the younger generation would do well to take down from the shelves, by name *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, was, in reality, only a variation on that one immortal theme.

Christ said: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.' . . . and a more apposite description of our whole attitude towards the League of Nations it would be difficult to compose. He also said 'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword', and that text might have caused some very awkward moments if it had been repeated, from time to time, during the international orgy of armament makers which was ironically termed 'The Disarmament Conference'.

All this, you may say, is ancient history. Perhaps. But it is also modern history. God knows, we have got ourselves into such a mess that it will need a divine power to get us out of it. However, there is that divine power, and we might do a good deal worse than invoke its aid. It is too late for anything else. Consider the German Colonial situation. Five years ago it might have been settled on a basis of common

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justice. But since our creation of Hitler . . . (and it cannot be too often repeated that Hitler is a direct product of the policies of Downing Street and the Quai d'Orsay) . . . is this any longer possible? We taught post-war Germany, for ten years, that the only way to get anything was to take it. We took out the old mailed fist, put it on her hand, and buttoned it up. As a result, any simple obvious gesture of justice which we may make will now be interpreted as weakness.

Besides, with our eyes blinded by the mists of Geneva, is it any longer possible to make a simple obvious gesture? Before making it we should have to consult the fourth under-secretary to the Czechoslovakian Fisheries Department. We should have to make quite certain that we were in no way infringing Clause 47B of the fifth postscript to the White Slave (Reciprocal Amendments Act) of Ecuador (given at Geneva, somewhat diffidently, October 14th, 1928). And we should have to be very positive that the Russian ambassador to Peru (if he had not been previously shot by Stalin, that pearl in the crown of democracy) would not have occasion to protest that Peruvian 'democracy' would not be 'menaced'.

This, English reader, is your policy. Not a parody of it, but your policy. A policy which affects you so directly that it is piling up your taxes, embittering your outlook, and making you wish that you had been born in another age. Many of your newspapers . . . though there are honourable exceptions . . . are fooling you to the top of your bent. They are drugging you with stories of our 'power'. They are flattering you with stories of our 'freedom'.

Are you sure of either?

You are proud of living in a 'democracy', are you not?

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Of course you are. Proud that you are not 'dragooned', harried from pillar to post. Of course you are. Democracy is a hallowed word. It seems almost indecent to attack it. It means, or should mean, that the lodgekeeper is as good a man as the squire. It means, or should mean, that there is equality of opportunity for me, you, and the man next door. It means, or should mean, that every soldier carries a marshal's baton in his knapsack, that every chorus girl has a ghostly, golden star in her hand-bag, which one day she will pin on Dressing Room Number 1. It also means that any English writer can write what he likes, when he likes, how he likes.

In reality, of course, it means none of these things. The mere possession of a Cockney accent is sufficient, in this democratic England of 1938, to debar a man from nine-tenths of the polite professions, and to make his assaults on the remaining tenth exceedingly embarrassing. In the same way (though again there are honourable exceptions), the editorial policy of many of the newspapers which are loudest in their championship of liberty, is dictated by the advertisers. On the whole, our press is still the freest in the world. But it is foolish to ignore the fact that no newspaper proprietor, however enlightened, can afford to run a great national paper without the revenue obtained from his advertisers. It is equally foolish to blink one's eyes to the possibility that some crisis may one day arise, perhaps sooner than we expect, in which the interests of the nation may run directly counter to the interests of the advertisers. What is to happen then? The danger may be remote but it is not academic. And the fact that it exists at all ought to cause us to speak at least a little less glibly about our own journalistic

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freedom in comparison with the slavery of the authoritarian press.

I detest the 'dictator' censorships. It sickens me to think that the works of fine men are to be cast out into the outer darkness because of some accident of race or political disagreement. But I detest equally, if not more, the hypocrisy of the 'democracies', who claim to be so far removed from a danger which is, actually, staring them in the face.

### VI

We must be about our business. We must switch back the searchlight from these foreign excursions and let it play over our own shores.

'Trailers' are the fashion nowadays. We like to be informed, at the movies, of the high-spots of the picture we are shortly to see . . . to know that there will be a murder here, a snow-scene there, and that throughout the picture there will stalk the tall figure of X, the hero.

Well, in this book — since I have now written it, and am only adding this first chapter as an afterthought — it will be evident that there is no hero at all. A land whose people are fat, foolish and ignorant, is no fit breeding-ground for heroes. There was a time when we might have had a hero of peace, when this country (which did at least make a faint effort to disarm), might have forced its will on the Comite des Forges, the armament ring which controls France, and through France, Europe. That time has vanished. We are back again, marching on the old road that leads so far from Tipperary.

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But we are marching out of step, without a song, and we are marching in circles.

Let us fall in, then, with the crowd, and walk through this country that we love so much, that is so quickly dying. And even before we have listened to the chatter of our companions, the very stones in the streets will have cried out to us that there is something wrong.

## CHAPTER II

### TOWERS OF BABEL

#### I

THERE are approximately ten thousand architects in Great Britain.

It would be an error, however, to assume that there are only ten thousand schools of architecture. A brief walk down Regent Street will soon dispel any such illusion.

Here the traveller staggers past façades of Egypto-Commercial-Renaissance, with glimpses of neo-Tudor up the side-streets. He passes from the shadow of Edwardian Attic in the south to Dietrich Doric in the north. If his eye is inclined to flinch, he can rest it on cool spaces of business-Byzantine, or on deserts of marble modernism relieved by an occasional oasis of pseudo-Georgian Louis Seize.

Regent Street is only an example, in miniature, of a process which has transformed London, in the past ten years, into the ugliest capital in the world. This is no longer a matter of opinion. It is a matter of fact. London, admittedly, was always, architecturally, a muddle, but it was a glorious muddle. To-day it is a nasty mess.

This may or may not be a matter of concern to you, on aesthetic grounds. There are many people who are able to live in surroundings of blatant hideousness without noticing them. They can travel down the Strand on the top of a bus without having to shut their eyes. They can walk up Park

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Lane, even on the brightest day, without contracting a headache from the sight of the monstrosities that line their path. The vulgarity, the meaninglessness of their great city does not affect them.

But it should affect them. For architecture, more than any other art, is the touchstone of a nation's spirit. This, again, is not a matter of opinion, but a matter of fact. And in view of this fact, the spirit of England is sick indeed.

A nation's architecture is even more valuable, as evidence for the historian, than a nation's literature. The philosophy of Plato, the plays of Aeschylus, the method of Aristotle . . . these we have with us in their entirety. But though they give us a whole world, in which we can live and dream and have our being, they do not tell us as much as the broken columns of the Acropolis. These have the simplicity of flowers blooming in a desert. They stand out, white and flawless, against a backcloth of barbarism. And though their carven petals may fall in dust about them, as long as a single stem remains, we have before us a triumphant tribute to the glory that was Greece.

'Beauty', as Oscar Wilde said, in one of those arrowed epigrams that pierced more deeply into the heart of truth than he either knew or cared, 'beauty is the highest form of genius, because it needs no explanation'.

Say that to yourself in the middle of the Strand. And then, if you dare, look about you. I think you will find that the Strand needs a good deal of explanation. Some of us wish that it could be explained away altogether.

## TOWERS OF BABEL

### II

Let us pause, for a moment, to examine this inter-relation between national architecture and national morale.

Consider Italy. The architecture of the Fascist regime is tense as the muscles of a fighter's arm. It is *consciously* tense, too; there is a quality of drama in it. The fighter knows that the crowd is watching him, and as he salutes, he gives the crowd its money's worth.

Not long ago I found myself, at noon, in the charming city of Brescia. I wandered about, through medieval streets, pausing to peer through a doorway, to look up at some fresco of figured stucco. I encountered the remains of a touring opera company, and watched the scenery being carted away. The opera was *Aida*, and the tarnished gold of the Egyptian columns and the crackling purple of the canvas Egyptian sky looked strangely pathetic in the sunlight.

Then suddenly, I came into a modern square. Mussolini Square, I suppose it was called. Every other square in Italy bears that name. And in a single step, I had passed from the old world into the new.

The architecture was electric with energy. Stark columns thrust themselves up with a power that can only be called phallic. Flights of steps were so designed that they seemed to impel the pedestrian to run up them . . . walking would have been incongruous. Two towers swept skywards with the gesture of clenched fists.

In the centre of it all was a statue of Mussolini on a horse. Whether Mussolini or the horse looked the more energetic, it would have been difficult to decide. They both gave the

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impression that the least irreverence would cause them to explode.

Now we come to the interesting point.

It was noon. The time when a man's forces, presumably, should be at their most powerful.

*And all round the square, under the angry columns, in the shade of the careering colonnades, the Italians slept.*

They drowsed over their coffee. They nodded over their newspapers. They curled themselves up on the marble pavements and snored.

There, in the four sides of that square you had as vivid a picture of modern Italy as you are ever likely to see. The energy has been supplied by one man, Mussolini. Outwardly, he has infused this energy into this people. Essentially, those people remain the same. They are proud of their great buildings, proud of their swaggering uniforms, proud of their place in the sun. But no sooner do they achieve that place in the sun, than they sleep in it.

There was once a very brilliant article about Italy in an American magazine called *Fortune*. The magazine was banned in Italy, because it contained the irreverent suggestion that Mussolini's principal task was 'de-wopping the Wops.'<sup>1</sup> I wish the writer of that article had been with me in Brescia. He would have seen that Mussolini had still a great deal to do.

### III

It would be fascinating to read, from the stones of the nations, the manifold lessons that are to be read, to compare

<sup>1</sup> 'Wop' is a contemptuous slang expression for a New York Italian.

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the ruthless beauty of some of the modern German buildings with the equally powerful beauty of Sweden, to see how the German architecture is on the defensive, as though its creators were subconsciously dreaming of fortresses, while the Swedes, who have never known the horrors of modern war, have opened their arms to the sky.

Such a task would be beyond the scope of this book. We must keep to England, and see what lessons we can learn here.

Of positive lessons, we shall discover nothing. England, in architecture, ranks rather lower than England in sport. At the last Olympic Games the British Empire, as far as I remember, tied with Holland, and was considerably out-classed by a large number of obscure republics. So it is in architecture.

We are creating practically nothing of any value to the future world. We are destroying practically everything of any value which we have inherited from the past. It is therefore on the purely destructive aspect of English architectural effort that we shall be obliged to concentrate.

Before I began to write this chapter I tried to get a list of the various societies, institutions, corporations, leagues, and all the rest of it, who, in their well-meaning but completely ineffective way, endeavour to stem the tide of barbarism which is turning England into an architectural shambles.

I began with 'The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty'. I learned that its president is H.R.H. The Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll, and that it has a distinguished list of 'honorary vice-presidents', ranging from the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Lytton to Mr. George Lansbury. And though I take off my hat to Mr. George Lansbury as one of the few pacifists to whom the

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word ‘peace’ means peace, and not ‘pacts’, nor any other thing beginning with P, I should be interested to learn the precise qualifications which Mr. Lansbury possesses for a position of this nature.

Far be it from me to decry the National Trust. Frequently in the clamour of modern destruction, its thin, piping cry of ‘Hands Off!’ has been heard. Sometimes, when no really big business is affected, its cry has actually been heeded. Of course, it is not allowed to interfere *too* much. All the same it tries very hard.

Opening its 1937 report at random, we find items such as this:—

*Bodiam Castle. Negotiations, as yet unfruitful, have been made for the purchase of some marshland close to the Castle.*

*A new punt has been bought for the moat.*

Two pages further on we discover with regard to that lovely piece of England, Coombe Hill, that . . .

*Repairs have been effected to the hedges, and another litter basket has been provided.*

And before we have time to register our appreciation of the litter basket, we are enchanted with the further information that . . .

*Members of the Committee met on the property to cut back the undergrowth round the seats.*

This is indeed gratifying. The members of the various committees, according to this Report, include the Most Honourable the Marquess of Zetland, the Viscount Esher, Professor G. M. Trevelyan, Professor Julian Huxley, the Right Honourable the Viscount Ullswater, etc. etc. Whether these distinguished persons all gathered together ‘to cut back the undergrowth round the seats’ is not entirely clear

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to me. The Report leaves it in a haze of fascinating mystery. But it is pleasant to try to peer through that haze, and see, as in a dream, the bent figures of marquesses, viscounts, historians and scientists laboriously removing nettles from under the benches in the park. A most elevating lesson in democracy.

And then . . . Runnymede . . . one of the most interesting names in English history. In world history. The name of the island where the first real charter of man's liberties was signed. The island of Magna Carta. What do we learn of this? We learn that . . .

*An arrangement has been tried, in co-operation with the Egham District Council, for employing police to patrol the land.*

If you are any the wiser, I am not. If you are inspired, I am not. And if you do not feel sick, I do.

### I V

Admittedly, we are losing our temper.

But how can any man, who loves his country, who cherishes the beauty of England . . . how can he keep his temper in the face of such puerilities?

The members of the National Trust probably feel as strongly as I do about these matters. That does not alter the fact that their impotence is ludicrous. The signs of it are scattered all over the land.

Their very existence is a scandal. Why should the preservation of our country be left to a collection of eager amateurs? Why is it not in the hands of the State, as it is in the much abused authoritarian countries?

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But the National Trust is only the beginning. There are dozens of other Councils, Leagues, Bands of Hope and Armies of Despair, all scrambling about our enlightened country, getting in each other's way, trying to salve a little from the wreckage.

For instance, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England. The Patron is H.M. the King. The President is the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres. The executive committee glitters with distinction. But . . . oh dear, oh deary me . . . the first thing that meets my eye, as I open the monthly report, is the pathetic information that '*The Council needs an additional 1500 annual subscribers of one guinea. Do your best to help us to obtain them.*'

Read that sentence very carefully. Let it linger in your memory. Fifteen hundred guineas a year. The equivalent of a few days' work by any competent film star. Then, if you can bear it, reflect that we are spending £1,500,000,000 on preparing to blow to blazes the 'rural amenities' of any other country which may get in our way. And then, pause, and trace on a piece of notepaper your interpretation of *Homo Sapiens, 1938*. And if you trace anything that does not bear a strong resemblance to an ape in a gas-mask I shall question your honesty.

### v

Thickly they flock upon us. Here is 'The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings'. What with National Trusts, Councils for Preservation and all the rest of them, we may be forgiven if we are a little confused.

Stretching out our hand towards the latest pile, we pick up

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a leaflet entitled 'Windmill section'. As we open it we learn that the 'Windmill Section of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings' — (pause for breath) — is, as we might have expected, in a bad way. It needs a great many people to give it five shillings a year. It seems difficult to believe that anyone who reads the pamphlet will refuse this little sum, after learning such enchanting details about windmills. There is a reproduction of one of Crome's loveliest landscapes, in which a windmill is the keystone of the design. There is a picture of a windmill drawn by the Duke of Windsor when he was Prince of Wales. Best of all, there is a quotation from an essay in praise of windmills by Robert Louis Stevenson, which shows him at his very happiest. I make no excuse for quoting it:

"There are, indeed, few merrier spectacles than that of many windmills bickering together in a fresh breeze over a woody country; their halting alacrity of movement, their pleasant business, making bread all day with uncouth gesticulations; their air, gigantically human, as of a creature half active, putting a spirit of romance into the tamest landscape. When the Scotch child sees them first he falls immediately in love; and from that time forward windmills keep turning in his dreams".

In spite of this the windmills of England continue to crumble and fall. There was a time when William Cobbett, taking his 'Rural Rides', could write, 'The windmills on the hills in the vicinage (of Ipswich) are so numerous that I counted, whilst standing in one place, no less than seventeen. They are all painted and washed white; the sails are black; it was a fine morning, the wind was brisk, and their twirling together added greatly to the beauty of the scene'.

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How many windmills would Cobbett have been able to count to-day?

It is not without reason that we are reminded of the classic story of the Duc de Vivone who, when asked by Louis XVI if he remembered a windmill that used to stand in the park at Versailles, replied, 'Yes, Sire. The mill has gone, but the wind is still there'.

On too many English hills the mill has gone, and the wind blows over the deserted stones . . . or worse, through the synthetic thatch of a neo-Tudor bungalow.

### V I

We have hardly begun. Here, clamouring for our support is the Georgian Group. Lord Derwent is its chairman. It has a distinguished committee. It confines its attention to buildings which have been erected from 1714 onwards.

It has not come into being any too soon. Berkeley Square . . . the very name is beautiful . . . has disappeared, and is rapidly being transformed into a series of Russian factories. Grosvenor Square has gone, and Portman Square, and St. James's Square. Dreadful little imitations of Park Avenue have been erected on their sites. Bedford Square remains, but is already threatened, by the British Museum on one side (irony of ironies!) and the Duke of Bedford on the other.

It seems incredible that the British Museum should express its culture by contemplating the wanton destruction of some of London's loveliest buildings, but that is the British way. It is as thoroughly British as the action of the Univer-

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sity of London, which has already torn down a corner of charming old Brunswick Square in order to make way for a Pharmaceutical School in the style of a Queen Anne rectory. If this is the example set by the guardians of English culture, what are we to expect from the ordinary men of business? As Robert Byron, the deputy chairman of the Georgian Group, has observed, 'We were always a nation of shopkeepers; but we used not to be, consciously, a nation of usurious vandals'.

And still they come, these bands of gallant workers, trying, with such meagre results, to save a little from the wreckage. Here is the London Society. Chairman, Lord Esher. Vice-chairman, Sir Alfred Rice-Oxley. As distinguished a list of Vice-Presidents as any man could want. The aim of the society is to 'stimulate a wider concern for the beauty of the capital city, the preservation of its charms, and the careful consideration of its developments'.

What a hope! Does it not strike you as fantastic that only the other day did the London County Council pass a resolution asking for the necessary authority to 'town plan' the *whole* of the City of London? We are supposed to be an intelligent people. London is the centre of a not inconsiderable Empire. And we are so careless of our heritage, so devoid, not only of common taste but common sense, that it is not till we find ourselves spending half our lives in a traffic-block that we suggest that the planning of our city might be regarded as a *whole*!

This book would be endless if we continued the list of these voluntary associations. I would like to have paid tribute to the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association of which Queen Mary is President. It does its best, against tremend-

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ous odds, to keep a few of London's green spaces green, to prevent every old burial ground from forming the site for a new cinema. However, we have had enough. The main point which we set out to make . . . that the very existence of these societies is, in itself, a scandal . . . may be considered as made.

### VII

We will end with a picture. It is a picture which will prove, more clearly than any arguments, the impotence of all these trusts, councils, committees and associations. It will prove, more strongly than any denunciation, the indifference of the modern Englishman to all his heritage of beauty. I only hope that there may be a few Englishmen who will feel, even for a moment, a fleeting shame.

Not long ago, I was in Lincoln. I climbed the steep hill to the cathedral. It is one of the loveliest buildings in our country, not only in its intrinsic detail, but in its situation, standing so proudly against the sky as a perpetual monument to a faith we are forgetting.

I wandered all over the cathedral, and came out feeling a better man. I walked through the courtyard, under the great Gothic gate, out into a little Georgian square. Here I turned, to take a last look.

And as I did so, a notice caught my eye. It hung on a building opposite me. It read . . .

THIS DESIRABLE FREEHOLD SITE  
FOR SALE  
SUITABLE FOR THE ERECTION OF  
A CINEMA ETC.

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I have been quite angry enough in this chapter without becoming any angrier. The facts speak for themselves. The building on which this notice was hanging was exactly opposite the gate of one of the most hallowed shrines of England. At the most, it was fifty yards from that gate. Immediately behind it was the historic wall of Lincoln Castle. And this was the site on which, presumably, we shall shortly see gigantic representations of Miss Mae West.

The only thing I need add to those facts is a brief personal note. As soon as I saw that notice I wrote as violent an article as I could write without infringing the laws of libel and published it in a newspaper which has a circulation of nearly a million. Not one reader wrote in to express either his agreement or even his interest.

In the same paper was published a short paragraph announcing the death of my dog. I was snowed under with letters of condolence from all parts of Great Britain. The letters were very welcome. But . . . well . . . I have said enough.



## CHAPTER III

### THE SOUND OF THE SIRENS

#### I

IN time of war the aesthete may gain a slight consolation from the rapidly increasing hideousness of England's great cities, by reflecting that these buildings were certainly made to be blown up, and are only getting their deserts. But the average man will be denied such comforts. It will not make much difference to him whether he is choking to death in the cellar of some charming old Georgian house or in the Tudor swimming pool of a modern apartment building. It is his life he will care about, and perhaps in his last moments he may wonder why he did so strangely little to protect it.

This book, through no fault of mine, is a series of variations on the theme of national apathy. And of all the examples of this apathy to be encountered in modern England none is more striking than the attitude of the average man to the question of defence from air attack.

It is not entirely the fault of the government. The directors of our destinies, who are aware of the facts, are in a considerable panic about them, as anybody with inside knowledge will agree. But they appear to be unable to transmit their apprehension to the majority of the population. How otherwise can you account for the phenomenon of the burghers of Brighton?

The names of the Brighton Town Councillors may,

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or may not, be remembered in the future histories of this little island. If they are not remembered, it will be through no fault of mine.

Not because they are playing any vital part in the destiny of the nation. Not because humanity is in their debt. Simply because among them are several men whom it would be impossible to meet, in the year 1938, outside England. These men, I am thankful to say, are in a minority. But since there *are* tens of thousand of their kidney scattered throughout England, a knowledge of their mentality is essential to any man who wishes to understand us as we really are to-day.

Brighton is only an hour from the capital. It is exceedingly bracing, and it offers to the Londoner the same sort of pleasant vulgarity as Atlantic City offers to the New Yorker.

Brighton, in the next war, lying as it does in a position of great vulnerability, will present an irresistible target to an enemy air-force. True, its nearest approach to fortifications are its pleasure piers, and its only form of weapons are the pop-guns with which the children fire at pebbles on the beach. But by now it is realized, through bitter experience, that no air-force makes the least differentiation, in modern warfare, between civilian and military objectives. And though every decent man must recoil in horror from the prospect of the slaughter of innocent civilians there are some of us who feel that if there is to be any slaughter, innocent civilians are entitled to receive their share of it just as violently as innocent soldiers. There is something a little nauseating about the sudden conversion to pacifism of thousands of persons who, as long as there was no danger to themselves, were ceaselessly uttering bellicose sentiments.

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However, that is by the way. The point we wish to make is that though England, at this moment, contains a number of people in a panic, it also contains a far greater number of people who are sound asleep. And among them are the afore-mentioned town councillors.

Not long ago there was a meeting of the Brighton Town Council to discuss plans for air-raid exercises. It was high time those exercises were carried out. On the Continent, towns of Brighton's importance had been carrying out such exercises for years. They had a complete system of 'black-outs', elaborate schemes for the evacuation of the population, and an impressive array of shelters. But at Brighton there was nothing. Nobody had been given an order to turn out a single electric light. With war a daily menace on the horizon, Brighton dreamed on tranquilly, congratulating itself on its bracing air.

Then, at last, Brighton woke up. It woke up with such a shock that one of the most distinguished members of the Town Council felt bitterly aggrieved. So aggrieved that he rose to his feet and uttered these historic words (for as a sidelight on the mentality of English public men, in these years of danger, they *are* historic). He said:

'It is outrageous that Brighton should be the one seaside place to start frightening away its visitors by having a black-out.'

To which another town councillor, of equal prominence, added a loud 'Hear, hear', and proclaimed the opinion that such exercises would be very 'bad publicity'.

Bad publicity! Frighten away visitors! It seems incredible that any men could make such statements when the lives of children were at stake. And indeed, it would be

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incredible, in any country but England. Not because England is any less humane than any other country. But because England, to the Brighton mentality, is still an island. It is still a

. . . fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war.

It is still

This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands.

It would seem that the time has come for us to revise, not only our histories, but our geographies as well.

### II

At this day and hour it should not be necessary to emphasize the vulnerability of England in time of war. And yet, this fact is not even partially realized by the average citizen.

After all, it is a long time since the days of William the Conqueror, when we were last invaded. It is a long time, too, since the last war, when air-raids, compared with modern air-raids, were no more irritable than a swarm of flies. We do not realize that the whole history of the world might be changed in forty-eight hours, and that we might suddenly descend from our proud position, as an Imperial race, to a position akin to that of Holland, but a Holland with empty coffers and a starving population.

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This prospect still sounds to us like a fantasy by Mr. H. G. Wells. Would to God that it were!

It is necessary to emphasize, at the risk of wearying the reader, the slothful complacency of the English mentality, for the simple reason that this complacency is the chief handicap of the air-defence authorities, who, as we have observed, are in no mild state of alarm over the whole problem.

They are keen and able young men. But though they may know exactly what ought to be done, as they sit in their offices in Horseferry House, Westminster, looking out of their wide windows on to the jumbled, closely-packed roofs of London, they can't do it. They can only do a fraction of it. Because of that strange, changeless force, the English spirit, which makes a fetish of all that is 'voluntary' and would prefer to be led to destruction rather than to be driven to safety.

And even that fraction which is being done has to be wrapped up in a manner which must strike the foreign observer as highly diverting.

For example, consider the question of air-raid 'wardens'. That is the name that has been chosen, by the authorities, to describe the voluntary workers who, in time of war, will be responsible for seeing that certain elementary precautions are taken in their immediate neighbourhood.

The very word is significant. It has a Dickensian flavour about it. It suggests a capacious stomach, a heavy tread, a ruddy complexion, and a deep bass voice, uttering slow solemnities. It certainly does not suggest anything approaching the keen, swift-moving, young district commanders who, in totalitarian states, are trained for instant action in the

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case of air-raids, who may be said to spend their lives on their toes, with their eyes to the skies.

But if the word is significant, the reality is more so. For there is to be nothing young, or swift, or dashing about the English wardens. If you read through the sober language of the official Air Raid Precautions Memorandum on this subject, you will learn that . . .

*Air Raid wardens should be responsible men, and save in very exceptional circumstances, they should be over thirty years of age.*

Nothing flighty about that, you will agree. Nor about the following . . .

*The general idea of an air raid warden is that he should be a responsible member of the public chosen to be a leader and adviser of his neighbours in a small area — a street or group of streets — in which he is known and respected.*

If we were describing the qualifications for the ideal churchwarden, we could not have used phrases more apposite.

It is the same throughout this memorandum. It is a very interesting document. For if you study it closely enough, you can learn quite a lot about the mentality which animates Britain as opposed to the mentality which animates the totalitarian states. For example, it will be very clearly brought home to you that life in this island is still largely directed by and for the older generation, whereas in the totalitarian states it is almost exclusively directed by and for the younger generation.

The memorandum states . . .

*On general grounds the older men, with a good sense of responsibility and of a type to inspire confidence among their neighbours, will be most suitable.*

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Quite true, no doubt, at any rate in Britain. But when I read it I thought of the middle-aged man who stood with me on a bridge at Nuremberg, not long ago, staring at a band of Hitler Jugend who were marching by with a song on their lips. A few minutes before, the leader of the advance guard had cycled up and required him, politely but firmly, to move his car into a side-street, as it might interfere with the procession. The boy who gave the order could not have been more than eighteen, the man who obeyed it could not have been less than forty-five. He obeyed without hesitation. All he said was a sad little sentence, which told me so much . . .

*'Im heutigen Deutschland ist alles Leben fur die Jugend organisiert.'*

And not only in Germany is life organized for the young. In Italy youth has been dramatized (for that is really the only word for it) in an even more spectacular manner.

*'Oggi e l'epoca della balilla.'*

And this phrase which stares at you from a hundred street-corners, in great letters splashed over wine-shops, on walls and bridges, is echoed in shrill voices by the songs of the children, marching in their little black shirts, with their little rifles over their shoulders, towards a destination which no man can foresee.

Such a spectacle is revolting to any man of peace. God grant that we may never witness it in England. But there is a very great difference between the wholesale militarization of the younger generation, which we see in Italy, and the mild discipline which some of us feel is so vital in this country.

In England, youth is undisciplined because youth is

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not trusted. The idea of young Bill giving orders to old Bill would be regarded with righteous indignation. Why, old Bill fought in the war! True, he's a little shaky on his legs just now, and inclined to forget things, but . . . well, everybody knows old Bill. And though young Bill may be quite a decent sort, and though he may be keen on all this air business, he's only twenty-two, and he might be dragging us out of bed at all hours of the night.

No thank you, old Bill's the man for us. And if we have to have any meetings about all this dam foolishness, we'll have them in the local pub, where we can swap stories about the last war, and not trouble too much about the next one.

Even more, as we study the wording of this memorandum, are we struck by its insistence upon the *voluntary* nature of our precautions. A puzzled foreigner, accustomed to being told what to do, and doing it, might almost mistake it for a charter of English liberties instead of a very urgent recommendation upon a very urgent problem. 'Volunteers', 'voluntary', 'purely voluntary' . . . the report abounds in these expressions, as though the authors of it were terrified that any critic might possibly accuse them of introducing the thin edge of conscription.

And indeed, they *are* terrified of that possibility. 'If any nosey young official came round to *my* door, and told *me* to put on a gas-mask (which I regard as the invention of the devil), I'd slam the door in his face, and if necessary go to prison before I'd wear it.' That is an extract from an actual letter which I received after an article which I once wrote suggesting that there should be compulsory training in anti-gas measures. I had not realized that the word

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'compulsion' is still, to the average Briton, the ugliest word in the language.

Therefore, our Air Defence experts have to walk warily. Theirs is a difficult and most unenviable job. As perhaps, the following section may convince you.

### I I I

One would have thought that when a man's house is on fire he would not have worried very much about the political opinions of the members of the fire-brigade. He would not hang back, on the sill of a blazing window, because the fireman happened to be a conservative while he himself was a liberal.

Yet this is precisely what a large section of the population of modern England are doing.

There lies before me an elegant monthly entitled *Discussion*. Its date is December 1937. It is one of the many communist publications with which the bookstalls of modern England are being flooded. On the cover it proclaims its motto . . . 'Without a Revolutionary Theory there can be no Revolutionary Movement' . . . an observation which, one would imagine, was sufficiently obvious.

The main part of this magazine is devoted to a discussion, by various communists, of the attitude which should be adopted towards the government's air raid precautions. And the principal conclusion at which they arrive is that the air raid wardens must be apostles of the class war. Not a word is said about their efficiency for the job in

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question, no suggestion is made as to their training. All that matters is that they should be revolutionaries.

'Not only could militant workers, communists, Labour comrades and Trade Unionists be invaluable in these positions, from the point of view of the struggles against the war-making Government', states the report, 'but because of their class line and knowledge of the working people they would be able really to help the civilian population.'

And again . . . 'It is not too late to make the apparatus of the wardens a medium of expression of the demands of the workers.'

And yet again . . . 'Every support must be given to the authorities at present holding out against paying *any* of the cost of the Government's defence proposals.'

A government which attempts the task of defending its people from air-attack, is not greatly assisted by such an attitude. At every step the authorities are hampered by the workers whom they are endeavouring to protect. Their efforts are met either with ridicule or with suspicion. During the recent 'black-out' in the Nore Passive Defence Area, which covers a big territory on both sides of the Thames estuary, thousands of workers stood about and jeered. 'A comic opera show' was the way in which most of the socialist papers described it. And when efforts were made, by the government, for the more extensive circulation, among the poorer classes, of the official Memorandum on Air Raid Wardens, they were met by the sullen hostility which is evident in the discussion which we have been quoting, where the Memorandum is described as 'a blue print for a vast machine for spying on working-class organizations'.

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Now do you see why the young men who sit in high offices at Horseferry House are obliged to walk warily? For we are a 'democracy', are we not? Therefore we would infinitely prefer to be blinded, shattered, suffocated or disembowelled than to suffer the horror of being directed by experts who know what they are talking about.

And now let us visit one of the largest air raid shelters in England, and study the attitude towards it of the people whom it may one day save from a violent death.

### I V

Not long ago I found myself walking down the front at Dover with a landlady and a stockbroker. Why I was doing this I cannot for the moment recall. Anyway they were both very charming people.

It was a warm golden day in late summer, the sort of day when an air raid is the last thing that one wants to think or talk about. Yet, for some reason or other, we found ourselves talking about air raids, and suddenly the landlady said, 'If you're interested you ought to see our air raid shelter.'

'Where is it?'

'Under the cliff.'

'Can we see it?'

'I suppose so.'

'And go in it, and inspect it, and make notes?'

'Why not?'

'But we might be spies. Or we might drop a time-fuse and blow the whole cliff down.'

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'My dear fellow, this is England. Not Germany.'

Very evidently, it is England and not Germany. For anything more English than that air raid shelter it would be difficult to conceive. Which is not quite what I mean, for the shelter itself is Roman — yes, it dates as far back as that. The adjective 'English' should apply to the manner in which the air raid shelter is guarded by the authorities. You see, it is not guarded at all.

Remember, this shelter may one day be the means of saving the lives of five thousand people in a town which is particularly liable to attack. Remember too, that the attack — as we are constantly warned — may come upon us more swiftly than any storm-wind that ever swept the Straits of Dover.

And then, see how we look after this place which is so vital to the safety of our people. We wander along the sea-front. The landlady, the stockbroker, and myself. The landlady and the stockbroker are inclined to be petulant, as it is a hot afternoon, and they would very much rather be bathing, in their different ways. (Landladies and stockbrokers, as everyone knows, have quite different ways of bathing.) However, I insist on seeing the shelter.

'It was used in the last war,' says the landlady, rather crossly. 'There's nothing *new* about it.'

'On the contrary, there's a lot that's new about it,' said the stockbroker, 'or there wouldn't have been so many people working on it, for so long. The fact that they've laid on water is new. It looks as though they expected people to be in there for days on end.'

'You give me the creeps,' said the landlady, and yawned.

Up a side-street, into a yard, and here we are. It is

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difficult to realize that in this little yard (open to all comers!) is the entrance to a shelter which may mean life or death to thousands. For it is such an ordinary little yard. Strewn with old timber and various pieces of junk, such as you see in any seaport town. An ancient car stands before the entrance. Let us hope that it will be moved away before the next war.

A pleasant house adjoins the yard. The home of Mr. King, the owner of the yard. The stockbroker goes to call him.

'Mr. King?'

'Yes, mate?'

A head appears over the stairs. Mr. King says he will be very pleased to show us over, if we will wait while he gets a candle. He apologizes for the need of a candle, but explains that the neighbouring kids were always running into the shelter to turn on the electric light.

'So the government switched it off,' he says.

He escorts us, with the candle, across the yard. On the way, the stockbroker notices a pile of old sinks in a corner. 'How much are the sinks?' inquires the stockbroker, who is building a new house. Mr. King tells him that they are two shillings each, and cheap at that. A bargain is struck. And so, we enter the shelter.

It is chill inside here, in this great cave, which stretches and stretches, through dark to greater dark, under the towering hills. Chill and a little frightening, in its loneliness.

'It wants people in it, to make it matey,' observes Mr. King, brightly.

We walk on and on. Round corner after corner. It grows increasingly cold.

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Yes, I think, it certainly wants people in it. Five thousand of them. Crouched together while the bombs thunder outside, and the echoes of their falling roar like wind through the twisted caverns. Staring at each other, tight-lipped, while the children scream. Wondering if their breathing is quite normal, wondering if the gas has got in, if there isn't perhaps a cloud, just a faint yellow cloud, over the lamps.

Mr. King reads my thoughts.

'See that sand?' His candle flickers over a pile of sand, freshly thrown on to the floor.

'That's for sandbags,' he says. 'They didn't have to have those in the last war. But now, with all this gas . . . And look here . . .'

His knuckles rap sharply on the wall. It sounds hollow. As the candle flickers over it we see that it is a door, let into the side of the cliff.

'That's in case the gas gets too hot for 'em. If it does, you just break down this door. And the whole lot goes charging down another passage and ends up in the Drill Hall.'

Silence. He taps again. Echoes. It is my imagination, of course, and obviously a very disordered one, but the echoes seem to grow louder, to chase each other, to grow louder still, to swell into screams . . . the screams of a maddened mob, trampling through those channels of chalk as the gas pursues them.

'Oh God . . . what's that?'

A hand on my arm. Yes. It *was* a scream. High-pitched, agonizing.

'Quick! Somebody's hurt.'

The stockbroker has plunged into the darkness. I follow,

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stumbling. Then a voice, shrilling cheerfully . . . 'It's all right.'

And as I turn the corner, I see a little boy with a tear-stained face, clinging whimpering to the wall. Just a little boy who had got lost in the dark.



## CHAPTER IV

### UP IN THE CLOUDS

#### I

THE tragic situation which is swiftly revealing itself to us, in a manner that must necessarily be staccato and incomplete, is heightened by the fact that the English people have always been accustomed to the best that the world has to offer. Needless to say that 'best', for the very poor, has frequently been miserable indeed, but it is not too much to suggest that a greater happiness for a greater number has been found, in these islands, more often than in any other country, with the possible exception of the United States.

We have not suffered invasion since the days of William the Conqueror. Our only revolution was a storm in a tea-cup compared with the revolutions which have swept the continent. Such religious persecution as we have endured has been hardly worthy of the name when we think of the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition. Dictatorship has been practically unknown to us. And since the days of Elizabeth a stream of treasure and riches has washed our shores with an influence upon our society as beneficent as the influence of the Gulf Stream upon our climate.

Moreover, we have been not undeserving of these benefits. If Empires had to be, the British were certainly as well fitted as any other people to possess one. The men who had been nurtured in liberty at home were able, without

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offence to their self-respect, to pass on at least a modicum of that liberty to their subject peoples. The men who had experienced so wide a tolerance were not liable to insist upon too harsh an orthodoxy from those of an alien race and an alien creed.

The British Constitution is, of course, the supreme example of our genius for administration. I am sure that a large number of our people do not realize that there *is* no such thing as the British Constitution. There is merely a collection of traditions, precedents and laws, written and unwritten, stretching back into the mists of history. Nothing even vaguely resembling the American Constitution exists, or ever has existed. Yet this curious, floating mass of ancient custom *works*, with remarkable efficiency. And it not only works but has shown itself capable of enduring strains which would have torn to tatters the most logical and ingenious structure that man could have devised, if it had ever been committed to paper.

### II

Since we have been accustomed to the best in the past, we might naturally suppose (since we are superficially at the height of our prosperity) that we should be entitled to the best in the future. Since we have ample means to do so, it would be thought that we would have spared no effort that would enable us to consolidate our inheritance and to enjoy its amenities.

Such a supposition involves us, inevitably, in a consideration of the air. If the Empire is to survive at all it will

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survive as an Empire of the air. That is even more true if there is peace than if there is war. Of course, it is obvious that a nation's commercial aviation must have a very direct connection with its military strength, since all commercial planes can be swiftly and efficiently adapted for war-purposes. However, the war menace is too urgent to need stressing. It is the peace menace which we are so tragically apt to forget.<sup>1</sup>

Not long ago there was a debate in the House of Commons which should have made a far greater sensation than it actually did. It was initiated by a Mr. Perkins who is one of the few members of Parliament who have not only been up in an aeroplane but have flown one themselves.

In it, among a great many other things, Mr. Perkins said: 'British commercial aeroplanes are the laughing-stock of Europe. They raise a smile whenever they alight. When one ex-warplane, with which the Imperial Airways planned to start a night service, came down in Berlin, German pilots hung a bird-cage on its tail.'

This, remember, in a country which has always had the best, in an age when our future history is written in the air as surely as our past was written on the sea.

The English man-in-the-street is by now so accustomed to daily revelations of his country's incompetence, that he is apt to dismiss such statements as 'alarmist'. It is a favourite word with him . . . 'alarmist'. It has a rather superior tone. It also absolves him from the necessity of doing anything.

I cannot think how any man who is even vaguely acquainted with expert opinion can comfort himself with

<sup>1</sup> Every contention in this chapter has been more than vindicated by the Cadman Report on Civil Aviation, which was published after these words were written.

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such complacent words. After all, even if he is not interested in his country's commerce, he surely has sufficient decency to be interested in his countrymen's lives? A young air generation is growing up, keen, alert, willing to take risks. In numbers, of course, the English air generation is far smaller than that of any other country of proportionate size and influence, but still it does exist. And I should have thought that it would have been impossible for the average man to hear, with complacency, such accusations as those of Mr. Perkins. . . .

Let me call a witness who is far more qualified to express his indignation than I am — Jim Mollison. He is the greatest airman that England has yet produced. What he does not know about British aviation is presumably not worth knowing. Here are a few phrases from an article which he wrote in the *Sunday Chronicle* at the end of 1937:

### CROYDON AERODROME

Croydon aerodrome (the chief civil aerodrome in England) is a howling disgrace. Every time I have landed there — even when there were great crowds to welcome me — I have been ashamed. The landing surface is bumpy. The field is surrounded on three sides by buildings. Flying to it at night is a nightmare. No wonder Croydon is the laughing stock of Europe. What Americans must think of it, I can only guess, for I dare not discuss it with them.

### SPEED

Why do the Imperial Airways take nine or ten days on the run to Brisbane? Three years ago Scott and the late Campbell Black flew from England to Australia

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in less than three days. Not long ago the Dutch offered to do the run regularly in four days if they were given fair support. No such support was forthcoming.

### EQUIPMENT

The great majority of aeroplanes on the Empire services are obsolete. On the India run and the run to Singapore, where we ought to be showing the world what we can do, we have a fleet of decrepit old crocks. And these dreadful old hen-coops are running in competition with foreign machines which fly faster, take off quicker, land slower, and beat ours by two whole days on the run to Singapore.

### COMPETITION

Our sea trade was built up by competition. Our air trade is being strangled by the absence of it. What British civil aviation needs is competition. If I wanted to start, say, a commercial air service to South Africa I would get no help from the Government. I should be suffocated out of the business before I could get started. It is exactly as if the Cunard White Star controlled all the harbours of the Empire.

There is a great deal more on the same lines which could be quoted. Is it true? If not, why is it not contradicted? How can we stand still, and make no reply to Mr. Mollison's main assertion that 'if you could talk with pilots of all nations, hear them discuss the adventures, conditions and grievances, you would be alarmed and ashamed?'

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### III

But *would* you be alarmed and ashamed?

Apparently not, if you are of the same mentality as the average member of Parliament who listened to the aforesaid speech in which the young airman M.P. told that story about the birdcage.

It ought to have made such a sensation that immediate action would have been taken. It didn't. There is going to be a 'government inquiry'. That is all.

In the meantime, while the taxpayer provides Imperial Airways with a large subsidy the proportion of air passengers which this line carries from Croydon has fallen from 80 per cent in 1933, to 50 per cent in 1937, because, in the unchallenged words of our friend Mr. Perkins, 'the public is beginning to find out the truth'.

We may not care very much, as taxpayers. We have to pay so much money for so many national stupidities, that a few pounds here or there make no difference.

But we happen to be members of a very great Empire, which, in spite of all its faults, has still a greater chance of spreading world civilization than any other community of peoples. And it is somewhat galling to see the very existence of that Empire threatened because its ancient rulers have omitted, for the last ten years, to tear the leaves off their calendars.

Of course, the aeroplane has come too soon. The skies that might have been made beautiful, as by the wings of doves, have been blackened, as by the wings of vultures. Man learned to soar to heaven with his body, but he left his mind in the mud.

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All the same, I would rather see England take to the skies than any other nation. We have (or we used to have) a breadth of vision that might have made them a happier place than they are to-day.

Enough of these lamentations, which are depressing me as much as they are depressing you. Let us have a breath of fresh air, and pay a visit to some of the young airmen who, in spite of every obstruction, are still sufficiently excited about life, even in England, to spread their wings and fly.

Which is the cue for the introduction of Tony. A brilliant young pilot, and a typical representative of the new generation of the air.

### I V

There are only 5572 civilian pilots in England, as compared with Germany's 29,342.

In spite of this, the enthusiasm of these young people is intense. They want to make England 'air-conscious'. Perhaps, one day, they may succeed.

We are driving down to Brooklands with Tony. On the way we stop for petrol. As we are about to move on, a map falls from Tony's pocket.

'What is that?'

'An air-map of England.'

'Can I see it?'

'Sure.'

I looked down at this, the first air-map that I had ever seen.

It was like peering into a new world. It was scarred all

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over with straight lines, which chronicled Tony's various trips. *Straight* lines, I repeat. And indeed, it is obvious enough that they should be straight, since the air-man flies 'as the crow flies'. But the landlubber, accustomed as he is to tracing a route in curls and twists and detours, is startled when he sees, for the first time, those straight, uncompromising lines on an airman's map.

The map had many other fascinating symbols on it. There were red stars, which stood for air beacons, that flash out signals through the night. There were blue circles, with tiny lines radiating inside them, marking the points of the compass. There were 'Danger Areas', most of them situated on the coast, which implied the presence of anti-aircraft stations, and the possibility of running foul of gunnery practice. There was a big oblong marked in red chalk, with London in its centre, and Tony told me that you were not allowed to go inside that oblong in bad weather.

Looking at this map made me realize that England, to this new generation of the air, is seen through utterly different eyes.

It is not an England of landscapes, but of landmarks.

For instance, the new Queen Mary Reservoir is just an admirable piece of engineering to most of us. To the airman, however, it is a sign and a portent, for the great black groin which runs down its centre happens to point directly to Brooklands. 'Many's the time I've thanked God for that reservoir,' said Tony.

Again, round Dorking there is a very pretty valley which, as far as I am concerned, means bluebells in spring, pleasant little inns, and autumn crocuses in a certain field which shall

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remain a secret. But to the airman this valley is known as 'Dorking Gap', and it is, often enough, a door to salvation, when the clouds are low on the hills.

It was when he mentioned the Crystal Palace that Tony, in phrases which were more symbolic than he realized, summed up the outlook, or perhaps one should say the downlook, of this new generation. He said:

'See that squiggle there? That's the Crystal Palace. Well, when the old thing was burned down, we all felt sick as hell. You see, the towers of the Crystal Palace pointed in a direct line to Croydon. Many's the time I've been thankful to catch a sight of 'em. And then the damned thing caught fire. Still, it's not as bad as it might be. There are still some stumps left.'

The passing of a whole generation is implicit in those sentences. Tony was raised (if I may say so without offence) in a chromium-plated cradle. To him the Crystal Palace is as much a part of ancient history, as much a 'monument' as, let us say, the Acropolis. It would never enter his head that there are, still living, men and women who were born years before that fabulous greenhouse first glittered to the Victorian sun. It would seem to him as odd as if you introduced him to the little princes who were strangled in the Tower.

Little did the great Queen think that one day those towers, which had so bravely commemorated her Albert's genius, would serve as signals to a swift tribe of young Englishmen, soaring far above them, far, far above, a part of the heavens in which she so bravely believed.

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### v

We arrived at Brooklands. It was a dull, grey day, with occasional showers of rain. Only a few privately owned planes were chugging about the aerodrome. It was good to get into the warmth of the air-club.

As soon as I entered this club (which is typical of the clubs which are common in every country but England), the sense of stepping into a new world was accentuated.

The rooms seemed to be designed to give the effect of floating in space. This was not due to any eccentricity in the scheme of decoration. It was rather a reflection of the mentality of the men who designed them. For instance, in an ordinary room, you never see the ceiling girders. They are plastered over, or camouflaged in wood.

Here they are left naked, and painted with aluminium. The effect is exhilarating.

In the hall there were show-cases which indicated the immense industrial and social changes which will follow in the wake of the air-age. There were, for instance, the faint, feeble beginnings of air-fashions for women. Silks with a pattern of gay scarlet wings. Trim leather jackets, '*which will enable you to face the clouds with true chic*'. (It is rather awful to realize that even in the clouds we shall be unable to escape from the repellent phraseology of the fashion advertiser.) There were little chromium-plated cigarette-lighters, shaped like aeroplanes. And of course, quantities of ties, badges, flags and symbols.

There were, needless to say, brightly coloured pamphlets advertising aeroplanes in flight. Inside the aeroplanes were

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young men with perfectly creased trousers, lolling back and talking to houris by their side. The houris wore expressions of unusual placidity. They gazed at mountain crags far below with the sort of mild interest that a young lady of the 'nineties would have reserved for the traffic in Kensington High Street.

The literature accompanying these idyllic pictures was so persuasive that even a very old lady, chancing to read it, might well have sold her bath-chair, and ordered a two-seater aeroplane as a more suitable means of progress up and down the promenade at Brighton. Only one phrase puzzled me. '*At normal speed, with the windows closed, the noise is no more worrying than an autumn breeze in the woodland*', wrote the advertiser. No *more* worrying? Why is an autumn breeze, in or out of the woodland, 'worrying' at all? The only occasion I can imagine being 'worried' by it would be if it suddenly began to blow down a lot of trees on one's head, in which case, presumably, it would be a cyclone, rather than a breeze. And why an *autumn* breeze? And why . . . but we must not probe too deeply into the minds of advertisers.

Most significant of all is the language of the coming age. A small dictionary could already be compiled of the new phrases you hear in these clubs. They are prophetic of a new vision of life. They drift casually into the air, like the sweet, chaotic runs and roulades of a great orchestra, before the overture begins.

'The deck.'

'The clouds were on the deck.'

'If it hadn't been for that, we should have hit the deck.'

'The deck? What is the deck? you ask yourself. And then

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you realize that the deck is Mother Earth. And to these boys, Mother Earth is just a spring-board from which they dive . . . into life.

'I've been hedge-hopping all the morning,' observed a youth by my side.

He did not mean that he had been running in a paper-chase, or following any sort of hunt. He meant that the clouds were low, and he had been . . . well, hedge-hopping.

You soon begin to understand this language without any further explanation. Thus when another young man informed me that he had been 'sitting on the railway line for nearly three hours', I did not conclude, as I should normally have concluded, that he had been endeavouring to commit suicide. I knew that he meant that visibility was so bad that he had been forced to follow the railway through the treacherous hills.

### V I

You may skip the next two pages, which are inserted by the way of a little light relief. It is merely an account of my first flying lesson. Its only value may be to remind a few young Englishmen that the air exists.

If I can fly, anybody can fly. I have no sense of direction and I cannot stop my mind from wandering. All the same . . . I fly.

I do not really wish to fly. It is cold and wet and windy, and I have eaten duck for lunch. But somehow I find myself putting on a leather coat, goggles, and helmet, and soaring into the air with an instructor.

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Suddenly he says, 'Now, you take control'.

I take control. With diffidence, I may say. I push the joy-stick forward, very gingerly.

'Go on. You've got to be firm with it. Not heavy-handed, but firm.'

I am firm. So firm, that we start to do a nose-dive. An idiot grin comes on my face. This is great. Terrific. This is power, life, energy with a capital E.

'Back again . . . and quickly.'

Panic. I pull it back. As we swoop up again I see a church tower, far below. I think of various epitaphs which would look agreeable on my gravestone.

'He soared.' That would be effective.

Very poignant. Untrue. But very, *very* poignant. Or . . . 'He tried to soar'? Perhaps that would be better? Or even . . .

'Keep her straight with the rudder', says the instructor.

I try. Without effect. If only the plane would stop for a minute! That is the first thing one finds about flying. You can't stop. It seems absurdly obvious, but it is not till you are in the air that you realize the strain of never being able to pause, even for half a second. One shoots forward and still forward, like an eternal arrow.

A very erratic arrow, too, as far as I am concerned. For I *cannot* keep the wretched thing straight. I shout to the instructor:

'How do I keep her straight?'

'It's rather difficult, with all this cloud', he informs me, in a bored voice.

I could have told him that myself.

'There's no visible horizon, you see,' he adds.

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Of that, also, I am aware.

'Perhaps the best thing,' he continues, 'would be to take that big bank of cloud over there as a horizon, and steer by that.'

Now, I ask you. Bouncing about in a cardboard box, like an intoxicated dragonfly, and being told to pin one's faith to a cloud.

All this, needless to say, will sound very crude and excitable to those boys and girls to whom flying is the normal method of progress. But perhaps it may remind them of their own early struggles, so that they need not be too contemptuous of me.

It is enough to say that eventually we landed. I spent the next few days studying catalogues of aeroplanes, and wondering if I should ever manage to look as cool and collected as those young men with the houris.

And then something happened which put the whole thing out of my head.

## CHAPTER V

### THE GODDESS OF CHANCE

#### I

THE thing that happened was that I won five pounds in a football pool.

It does not sound like the sort of event that alters a man's life, particularly as I had nothing to do with filling in the coupons. It would be easier for me to compose a family tree of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines than to make any sense out of those little squares of pathetic prophecy into which so many millions pour their intellectual energies week by week.

It merely happened that I had lent a little money to an unemployed man. He invested it, without my knowledge, in a football pool, won fifty pounds, returned me my five, and promptly went to the dogs.

It was this trivial event which caused me to interest myself in the gambling situation in this country. What I learned astonished me. I discovered an entirely new world.

I learnt of the existence of an immense class of persons living solely for the propagation of gambling.

I learnt that the annual betting turnover from which these persons extracted their profits amounted to the almost unbelievable sum of £400,000,000 a year . . . a sum equivalent to nearly half of the national budget.

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I learnt that in this profession sport was merely an adjunct of gambling. I had previously imagined that gambling, at least in this country, was an adjunct of sport.

I learned of such great vested interests playing so shamelessly on national credulity (a credulity which it was difficult to associate with an even half-educated people), that I decided to write a book about it. It is lucky for you that I gave up the attempt, for it would certainly have been a bore. But one thing leads to another. I was like a doctor who, on examining a patient for a minor complaint, discovers that this complaint is the symptom of a deep-seated disease. And I came to the conclusion that this disease of gambling was symptomatic of a widespread national decadence.

That is why the winning of my five pounds was important to me, if not to you.

### II

It was while I was walking through one of the dirtiest slums of Glasgow, a few days after the aforesaid winning of five pounds, that I first began to be disturbed. For as I peered into the grimy little shops, I was struck by the number of charms, mascots, and various objects of infantile superstition which jostled each other in the windows. It was not merely a question of an occasional lucky charm in a pawnbroker's window. There were dozens of shops, almost entirely given up to these things.

There were little nickel-plated swastikas, at threepence, guaranteed to bring you luck. There were bowls of white

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heather, at least it was called white, though the smuts of Glasgow had turned it to a dirty grey. There were, of course, shamrocks galore, for Glasgow has a large Irish population. There were jet ornaments, such as one is offered in Port Said, made in the shape of a hand to ward off the evil eye. There were brooches containing 'lucky hairs', whatever they may be, quantities of 'genuine rolled gold' horse-shoes with injunctions on each card to wear it the right way up 'or your luck will run out'. There were even bottles of perfume, which, according to the legend on the box, 'will bring your loved one back to you'.

I rubbed my eyes. Was it possible that this was 1937, and that I was walking down a street of the second greatest city in the world's greatest Empire? I happened to have brought a set of *The Decline and Fall* with me to Glasgow . . . (Gibbon is the ideal bedside book) . . . and when I returned to the hotel I turned up the celebrated passage in which he refers to the growth of every form of superstition in the reign of Valentinian.

'The nations and sects of the Roman world admitted, with equal credulity and similar abhorrence, the reality of that infernal art which was able to control the eternal order of the planets and the voluntary operations of the human mind. They dreaded the mysterious power of spells and incantations, of potent herbs and execrable rites, which could extinguish or recall life, inflame the passions of the soul, blast the works of creation, and extort from the reluctant daemons the secrets of futurity. They believed, with the wildest inconsistency, that this preternatural dominion of the air, of earth, and of hell was exercised, from the vilest motives of malice or gain, by some wrinkled hags and

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itinerant sorcerers, who passed their obscure lives in penury and contempt. The arts of magic were equally condemned by the public opinion and by the laws of Rome, but, as they tended to gratify the most imperious passions of the heart of man, they were continually proscribed and continually practised.'

Those words sounded strangely familiar, and unpleasantly applicable to the British Empire of 1937.

I began to look about me. I saw, for instance, the alarmingly swift growth of the pseudo-science of astrology, with its anti-social doctrine that our fate is written, not by our own strong hands, but by the pale pattern of the stars. I saw great newspapers, claiming to direct the policies of an intelligent people, devoting pages of gibberish to the popularization of these superstitions. Walking down the streets of London I saw buses charging along, bearing placards which screamed the question 'What is to-day's ruling number? Buy the *Daily Blank*, and see!'

I asked myself 'What right has a people so riddled with superstition, eager to invest such vast sums in such pettiness, to criticize other countries for the follies of Fascism or the brutalities of Communism?' It may be true that Fascism and the orthodox church have not always seen eye to eye, and it may be true that an anti-religious museum is the proudest monument of modern Moscow. But even the cult of Wotan, even the cold negativism of the Soviets, has a certain dignity compared with the shrill chorus of commercial astrologers, inking themselves in Fleet Street, pouring out their puerilities because it is 'good for circulation'.

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### III

In the hope that you may possibly be persuaded to share these sentiments, we will now examine some figures.

It is obviously impossible to give an absolutely accurate estimate of the national expenditure on gambling, in all its various forms, for there is no adequate machinery with which to check the statistics. However, even if we use only the most conservative authorities, we shall find that the figures are staggering.

We have already seen that the total national expenditure on gambling is approximately £400,000,000 a year. As sober and reputable an authority as *The Economist* estimated some two years ago that the sum was between £350,000,000 and £400,000,000.<sup>1</sup> However, competent experts to whom I quoted these figures have suggested that they are far too small, for two reasons. Firstly, because they are based on the statistics available for 1935, and because the craze for every sort of gambling has spread like wildfire in the last two years. Secondly because they take no account of a great deal of miscellaneous gambling, of which there can never be any record, varying from 'private lotteries' (as defined in and legalized by the 1934 Act), which include many forms of sweeps, to gambling on a humble game of bridge.

Still £400,000,000 per year, even if it does not represent the true state of affairs, is a large enough figure to make one think. It is for instance, almost exactly equivalent to the combined local expenditure, in England and Wales, on

<sup>1</sup> *The Economist*, February 29th and March 7th, 1936.

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elementary education,  
higher education,  
hospitals,  
public libraries,  
maternity welfare,  
asylums,  
police,  
parks,  
poor relief,  
sewerage,  
tramways,  
waterworks,  
baths,  
cemeteries,  
fire-brigades,  
electricity,  
gas,  
harbours,  
highways,  
justice,  
housing,  
planning,  
public lighting,

... and a few other things.

The greatest individual item of this expenditure is provided by horse-racing, which in 1929 has a yearly turnover of £230,000,000<sup>1</sup>. This figure, presumably, has greatly increased to-day. In 1933 the Royal Commission on Lotteries and Betting reported that it was 'significant that gambling has increased at a time of economic and

<sup>1</sup> First Annual Report of race-course betting control board.

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industrial depression'. 1933 was the lowest year of the last slump. Since then we have enjoyed . . . with certain hectic reverses . . . conditions which are, by comparison, prosperous.

It is the rapidity of the increase which is so disturbing. Here are a few facts which illustrate that increase:

1. There are more people, in modern England, devoted professionally to the propagation of gambling than are engaged professionally in the propagation of religion.

2. 14,000 bookmakers received licences from the State during the reign of the recent Betting Duty. At least as large a number of unlicensed bookmakers are operating. Their pimps, clerks, 'tic-tac' men and such-like swell the great army of propagandists to 150,000.

3. In 1934 the yearly turnover on Football Betting was £8,000,000. In 1936, it had risen to £20,000,000. A year later it was £30,000,000. A similar increase may be seen in every department of gambling, from greyhound-racing to automatic gambling machines.

### I V

What is the explanation of these bewildering figures?

Have we all suddenly gone mad? Been bitten by some fever engendered by world unrest? Do we feel that life is so uncertain, security so elusive, that honest endeavour is useless and that we might as well have a fling before the deluge?

That may be the mentality behind the craze. But it is a little too vague for my liking. I prefer something more

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objective. I obtain it in a quotation from a letter written to me by the secretary of the National Anti-Gambling League, Mr. John Gulland, to whose exhaustive researches (which I have independently verified) I am indebted for some of the statistics in this chapter. Mr. Gulland states:

'The problem to-day is not that of petty gambling between man and man, or even large scale gambling among rich individuals. The problem to-day is the emergence of gambling as a *trade*, and the systematic exploitation of a human weakness by a professional class.'

It is very important to realize this fact. It is only too easy to attribute the sensational increase to various vague 'psychological' reasons. To the monotony of work in this mechanized age, for example, to the 'escape complex' engendered by a life in dreary surroundings, limited in its possibilities by a small fixed wage.

These may be contributory causes, but they have *always* been contributing causes. There is nothing new in them, nothing to account for the staggering increase of these latter years. Life has always been pretty dull and monotonous for the majority of workers, not only in England but in every industrial country. To-day, indeed, it has far more distractions than it ever had before. So we cannot put down the gambling fever to such causes.

No. It is the fact that the whole thing has suddenly become a trade that is so significant. This trade has reached such proportions that it is doubtful whether it could now be eliminated without a social revolution. For instance, according to the evidence given on behalf of the Greyhound Racing Club to the Royal Commission on Lotteries, the attendance at greyhound-racing tracks has grown from

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5 millions in 1927 to 18 millions in 1932, and is conservatively estimated at 25 millions in 1937.

But you will be growing dizzy with statistics. Let us have a moment's respite from them, and study two of the most popular forms of gambling now prevalent in this country . . . the dogs, and the football pools.

### v

There are over two hundred dog-racing tracks in Great Britain, and a conservative estimate of the amount of money which is literally and metaphorically going to the dogs every year, from this item alone, is £50,000,000.

Of course the shareholders, the promoters, and all those who make money out of this human weakness, would accept the literal interpretation but would strenuously deny the metaphorical. After all, if you get thirty per cent on your money (the amount of the dividend paid by the Greyhound Racing Association Trust Ltd. in 1936) it does not much matter if you are, or are not, improving the morale of your countrymen.

All the same, I should not personally like to have any dividends, however profitable, from such an undertaking, any more than I should care to receive blood money from the armament makers. For of all the organized fatuities which have yet been devised to satisfy the cravings of a leaderless democracy, dog-racing is the supreme example.

Come with me to one of the most renowned tracks of London, and see this sport with unprejudiced eyes.

The stadium holds, at a moderate estimate, thirty

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thousand people. It is lit by lamps whose beams radiate into the foggy night, so that from a distance they look like pale, ghostly ballerinas, with milk-white skirts, poised before a vast audience. It is bitterly cold. There is no gaiety. It is all strangely silent.

Suddenly there is a roar. You stare out and you see a white streak flash round the course, followed by six other white streaks. And before you realize it, the race is over.

How long does each race take? Thirty seconds? It doesn't seem as long as that, but even assuming that it takes a minute, it is indeed a brief reward for a quarter of an hour's wait, on a night like this. If I went to a play and found that each of the three acts lasted four minutes and each of the intervals lasted one hour (which is in exactly the same proportion), I should demand my money back. But such an attitude would be regarded as eccentric by the devotees of the dogs.

Turn round, and scan the faces of England's youth, lit by the lamplight. They look doped. Hunched shoulders, caps over forehead, a half-burnt cigarette drooping from lips which occasionally part and reveal blackened teeth. Hands deep in pockets which still contain a few coppers left over from last week's dole. It is not an inspiring sight.

It is unfortunate to possess the inclinations of an artist, however inferior an artist, combined with the urge of the social reformer, however feeble and spasmodic the urge. It spoils a great deal of one's fun. It prevents me, for instance, from seeing this vast arena as an aesthetic whole, from playing with the idea of the ideal artist who might be commissioned to paint it. Sickert might have taken a corner of it, and lit it with the flare of his genius, stringing a circle

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of lights against the grey tent of the sky and giving a touch of the baroque to the strangely decorated stands of the book-makers. Picasso would have done something exciting. Goya, obviously, would have found inspiration. Perhaps Frith would have been best of all, for Frith would have painted, as he always painted, not only a picture but a social document. And since it is this aspect which concerns us, we must stifle our aesthetic inclinations and return to our *moutons*, or rather to our *chiens*. The football pools are waiting for our inspection.

### V I

No form of gambling in this country, or indeed in any other country, has made such rapid strides as the form which is known as the Football Pool. Ten years ago it did not exist. To-day the volume of correspondence it entails is so immense that it is worth £140,000 a week to the Post Office. Even two and a half years ago, the pool letters posted in seven large cities (excluding London) amounted to an average of 5,371,392 each week.

These are the official figures given by the Postmaster-General at the end of 1935. Since pool betting has nearly doubled in the last two years, since London was excluded, and since in any case, these figures were based only on special deliveries, it is safe to suggest that well over 30,000,000 letters per week are now posted in Britain, all addressed to the Goddess of Chance. This figure, it will be observed, roughly corresponds with the estimate of £140,000 a week, which is what the pools are worth to the Post Office, basing the calculation on three halfpence per letter.

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Statistics can be boring, but when they are intimately connected with a very grave social problem, and when they attain to such astronomical proportions, it is our duty to bore ourselves with them. In any case, I cannot imagine that any man who takes any interest in what his countrymen are doing or thinking can be 'bored' by such statistics as those.

*Thirty million letters a week to the Goddess of Chance.*

Out of a population of forty-four millions.

It is a social phenomenon which we cannot ignore. Those of us who have been to the distressed areas and have seen, as I have seen, crowds of men hurrying from the labour exchanges, to spend the first two shillings of their weekly dole on a postal order for a football coupon, are not likely to forget a sight so unhappy and so sombre. Two shillings represents a high percentage of the total sum available for food, rent, and clothing. And yet, according to the chairman of the largest firm of pool promoters in the country, it is the average bet of the poor man. Is it any wonder that in all the chief industrial areas, retail traders, especially in the clothing line, are complaining of the huge sums of money that are being diverted from clothing clubs into the Pools? Is it any wonder that the Cinematograph Exhibition Association have stressed the urgency of the problem, which is causing a serious decline in the attendance at the picture houses?

Is it any wonder, to turn from the grave to the ridiculous, that hostesses with large country houses say that they can't get their servants to do their work properly, because all they think of is 'the pools'?

I don't care in the least about the rich woman's servants,

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but I do care about the poor woman's clothing clubs. Two shillings a week goes a long way towards buying a child a new dress or a new pair of shoes. No doubt many of the dupes who spend their pitiful incomes on the pools are thinking of their children's welfare, dreaming of some chance that may set them far above the border line of poverty for ever. If they only knew the immensity of the odds against them! If they only knew that on a strict mathematical basis the chance of forecasting correctly in 20 matches is one in many millions, and in 15 matches one in many hundred thousands!

But how can they know? In the newspapers they see glittering advertisements in which families are transported from poverty to luxury merely by buying somebody's 'system'. It is obviously in the interests of the authors of these 'systems' to stress the chances of success and to minimize the chances of failure. And so, on the purchase of the 'system' goes another two shillings from the family budget, sometimes indeed as much as twelve shillings, for that is the price of a book on the 'science' of pool betting which is now being advertised in England.

And every time that a win is recorded, in some squalid city, all the arts of publicity are employed to drag in more victims. The winner is photographed, interviewed, dined and fêted. He is handed his cheque by a popular film star in a brilliantly lit auditorium. The illusion is spread, among the local inhabitants, that this is the one chance of success, the one way to happiness.

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### VII

It would be only too easy to multiply the examples which may be found, in every town and village of England of the craze for gambling, which Maeterlinck once described as the 'imaginary, squalid, mechanical, unlovely adventure of those who have never been able to encounter or create the real, necessary and salutary adventure of life'.

In other words the only adventure left in a country without a hero. We have not, for instance, noted the startling growth of the various forms of gambling machines, which seem to defeat every attempt of the authorities to declare them illegal. They have killed the spirit of the old England fair, they are the main purpose of many 'social clubs', and in the case of the 'pin-tables' they make so much money that two shops in London where these pin-tables are now operating are rented at £120 and £160 a week! One might indeed compare their owners to Monsieur Blanc, who founded the 'Société Anonyme des Bains de Mer' at Monte Carlo. They used to say of him '*C'est encore rouge qui perd, et encore noir, mais c'est toujours Blanc qui gagne*'.

But presumably enough has been said to indicate the dimensions of the problem. If I have appeared in this chapter to speak with undue emphasis it may be due to the fact that I am what is known as a 'born gambler'. In three days I lost the savings of ten years' arduous work, gambling on Wall Street. Years ago I tramped over the long road that leads from Phaleron to Athens, at dawn, having been wiped out in a dirty little casino by the harbour. At any bar in Europe the sound of poker dice, the slither of the backgam-

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mon counters, has an irresistible appeal to me. I beg your pardon. Irresistible may have been the right word once. It is so no longer, because I have been strong enough to resist it.

But I know how hard it is to suppress this habit, even if one has enough education to realize the odds against one, enough discipline to apply oneself to better things, and enough money to be able to dispense with windfalls. Millions of my countrymen have neither this education, this discipline nor this prosperity. And it is in their concern, and not in their contempt, that I have written.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE SOBER TRUTH

#### I

ALTHOUGH I have respect for the motives of those who write religious tracts I should be the last to deny that this form of literature is frequently funny.

For instance, the first item in my scrap-book (composed of oddments which at various times have struck me as amusing), is a tract on drink. It was thrust upon me in an American pullman car by a coloured porter who smelt strongly of rye whisky. It tells the story of a nasty little boy who was run over by a motor car while he was endeavouring to save the life of an equally nasty little girl. The little boy was, happy to relate, mortally wounded. Just as he was about to pass away, a well-meaning (but depraved) stranger ran up with a flask of brandy, and put it to the boy's lips. With a noble gesture the little monster thrust it aside, gazed at the stranger with a cold blue eye, and said, 'What? Would you ask me, who am about to go into the abode of my Maker, to enter His presence with brandy in my stomach?' Whereupon he expired.

The net result of that tract upon me was to cause me to ring the bell, to observe with unexpected affection the odoriferous porter, and to order a Manhattan.

I hope that the present chapter will not have a similar effect upon the reader. Reading portions of it which are

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already written, I have a suspicion that some of it may sound like that tract. I have made it as objective as possible, at the risk of making you feel that you have had a surfeit of statistics.

It would have been pleasanter to have been excused from the task of writing the chapter altogether. Pleasanter, and more popular too, for one of the proudest boasts of the modern Englishman is that he grows yearly soberer and soberer. If I have once seen the headline 'Sober England', (accompanied by stories about business men who never drink anything but milk at luncheon), I have seen it fifty times.

That the legend of 'Sober England' is illusory will be regrettably obvious from the statistics in the present chapter. But since you have had enough figures for the present, we will begin with a picture.

### I I

It was like one of the coarsest cartoons that Rowlandson ever drew of an orgy in an eighteenth century tavern. But Rowlandson's cartoons, even when their subjects were nauseating, at least had a quality of beauty. Here all was hideousness.

A harsh flood-light shot its beams on to the fake oak and thatch of the neo-Tudor public house. Its glare revealed the vulgarity of the design, the cheapness of the paint, the pretentiousness of the timber.

But it revealed a good deal more than that.

It revealed a crowd of hundreds of people, staggering,

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shouting, and in some cases, being sick. It revealed couples sprawling in charabancs, waving bottles over their heads. Boys and girls whirling round in a frenzy. Old women, sitting on the edges of cars, having, as we say, 'passed out'.

'Better drive carefully,' said my companion.

We drove on. A mile or so up the road, there was a repetition of the same scene. But this time it had a variation. The flood-light revealed, not only the same drunken mob, the same orgy of dancing and screaming . . . it also revealed a car smashed to atoms, and something that had once been a man, stretched out on the bank, covered over with a tarpaulin. The police were finding it difficult to keep back the crowd.

'That won't be the last, either,' said my companion.

We drove on. We met three more accidents. All outside the same sort of pub, floodlit in the same way, surrounded by the same sort of mob.

No . . . it was not the night of the Coronation. It was not Armistice day, nor boat-race night, nor any anniversary. It was just a nice summer evening. And that was how some thousands of the inhabitants of the capital of the world's greatest empire chose to spend it.

III

If I have painted this picture in colours which are unduly dark, the reason must be that only the week before witnessing this scene, I had returned from Germany. And in the thousands of miles which I travelled throughout that country the

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only drunken people I observed were two English society women at a cocktail bar in Berlin.

The sobriety of Germany may be due to the poverty of the people, though I prefer to think that it is due to the almost religious respect with which the majority of young Germans now regard the human body. Whatever the reason, the contrast that Germany presents with other countries is startling. Cross the frontier into Belgium and before you have travelled half an hour over the Belgian roads, you will have pulled up with a scream of brakes, to avoid some staggering figure. Cross the frontier into Poland and you will have to contend, not only with drunks, but with half-wits. That at least was my experience. Poland seems to possess the largest proportion of village idiots of any country in Europe. They emerge suddenly from hedges, and stand gibbering in the middle of the road, looking round for stones to throw at the windscreen.

However, this is not the place to record fragmentary impressions of travel in Europe. The only reason that I mentioned Germany was in order to be excused in case I had painted a picture which was prejudiced and exaggerated.

Is England drinking more?

It ought to be an easy question to answer, in view of the abundance of available statistics. But it is not at all easy.

Statistics can be twisted to almost any shape that suits the fancy of the statistician. On the subject of drink they can be twisted out of shape altogether.

The abolitionist can show you figures that make your hair stand on end, figures which leave you with the conviction that we are more drunken to-day than at any period in the past. The brewer can take the same figures and make

## THE SOBER TRUTH

them prove that we grow soberer every day, and that if things go on like this, he doesn't know what he'll have to do for a living. The moderate can contradict both sides, and leave you with such a general feeling of bewilderment that you want a strong whisky and soda in order to clear your addled brain.

At first sight the figures show a marked advance in the direction of sobriety. According to the latest Licensing Statistics published by the Home Office, 188,877 persons were convicted for drunkenness in 1913, which adds up to the appalling percentage of over 50 persons out of every 10,000 inhabitants.

In 1936 this figure had shrunk to a mere 44,525 . . . a proportion per 10,000 of under 11.

In other words, the convictions for drunkenness had shrunk, last year, to little more than a fifth of the pre-war figure.

In these circumstances it would seem, to many people, that we should be justified in congratulating ourselves, sitting back, and leaving well alone.

I do not agree with these people, and again I base my disagreement on statistics. There is something ominous about the little table which follows:

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Convictions for<br/>Drunkenness</i> | <i>Proportion per 10,000<br/>of population</i> |
|-------------|--|--|
| 1932        | 30,146                                 | 7.50   |
| 1933        | 36,285                                 | 8.99   |
| 1934        | 39,748                                 | 9.82   |
| 1935        | 42,159                                 | 10.37  |
| 1936        | 44,525                                 | 10.90  |

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I am informed on the highest authority that the statistics for 1937, which are not yet available, will show yet another considerable increase.

Now if these figures were figures of prosperity, of rising profits or increasing employment, they would be trumpeted through the land as a tribute to our national sanity. But as they are figures of disaster, they are usually kept pretty dark. If you regard the word 'disaster' as too strong, it can only be assumed that you are one of those lucky ones who have not seen, with their own eyes, the desolation which is the lot of any family that is haunted by the shadow of drink.

We will sum up the foregoing statistics in one sentence. *In the past six years the convictions for drunkenness, per 10,000 of the population, have increased by 41.58 per cent.*

Let us now see if we can find out why.

### I V

The fatigued reader will now, no doubt, resign himself to an onslaught upon the brewers.

There is no reason for him to do so. Any man who has a knowledge of the English climate, and the English temperament, will realize that England would probably be worse off without beer than with it.

It is possible that more men have been killed through eating too much bread than through drinking too much beer. It is certain that a mild attack of indigestion, from the aforesaid bread, is as fatiguing to the constitution and as fraying to the temper, as a mild attack of intoxication from the aforesaid beer.

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It is true that one might wish the brewers to insult our intelligence somewhat less flagrantly by their advertisements. If they said, 'A reasonable amount of beer is good for your body and certainly won't hurt your soul' . . . and left it at that . . . there would be no occasion for complaint. It is when they publish pictures of air-pilots, suggesting that a constant diet of beer is the only way to steer a straight course in the air, that one revolts. When, for example, a well-known brewer like Sir Edgar Sanders tells his association that they should advertise testimonials from footballers, cricketers, prize fighters, and so on, saying, 'Our strength is derived from beer', the result is to make the intelligent man want to go off and sign the pledge, out of sheer irritation. However, since the briefest study of the advertisement columns of any newspaper convinces you that the intelligent man must be in a startling minority, perhaps we are asking too much of the brewers.

In any case, it is not beer which is filling the police courts and piling up the criminal statistics. It is something new in the history of British drink. It is as new as the black tea habit which, at the moment, is proving so great a menace to the health of the Egyptian nation.

The Egyptians flew to black tea because of the efficiency with which Russell Pasha stopped their supplies of hashish. For generations they had drugged themselves. Suddenly, they could drug themselves no longer. Their tortured bodies cried out for some substitute, and they found it in black tea. This they brew for days on end, occasionally adding to it the juice of the date-palm. When they finally drink it, the effect upon the mind is at once narcotic and aphrodisiac. The effect upon the body, needless to say, is destructive. Death

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comes to the black tea drinker with even greater speed and agony than to the hashish addict.

Nothing so exotic, admittedly, is to be encountered in the English scene. But in the last ten years there have appeared on the market a number of cheap concoctions which are in the highest degree pernicious, as perhaps the following facts may convince.

One of the most popular of these is a stuff called 'British Wine'. There are of course many sorts of 'British Wine'. Most of them come from South Africa or Australia. Some of them are admirable . . . I have drunk South African hock which compared favourably with the average Niersteiner, and there are some excellent Australian 'burgundies'. But that is not the sort of wine which is winning favour, to an alarming degree, in hundreds of English public-houses.

Its alcoholic content may be judged from the simple comparison that a shilling spent on Scotch whisky buys 1.48 fluid ounces of proof spirit, whereas the same sum spent on 'British Wine' buys nearly 5 ounces. Nor is it merely a matter of mathematics, for the physical damage done by these wines is out of all proportion to the amount of proof spirit consumed. In case I am accused of speaking 'without the book', the reader may refer to a recent investigation carried out by the Manchester Licensing Magistrates. In this investigation they did not attempt to deny that England was faced with 'a completely new problem of drunkenness'. This problem first became acute last Christmas, when many of the hospitals of Manchester and its district were crowded with alcoholics suffering from the effects of 'British Wine'.

'According to the report of the investigation it was the impression of the hospital doctors that wine accounted for

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two-thirds of the drunken patients treated in hospitals, nearly half of whom were women'.

Of course, the root of the problem is price. If you can get two and a half times as drunk on this wine as you can get on whisky, you will naturally choose the wine, if you wish to get drunk. Most people who go into public-houses, of course, don't wish to get drunk at all. The fact remains that they do. And they will continue to do so, in increasing quantities, as long as this wine is available.

This is only the beginning of the picture. Doctors in the East End of London have reported that a rapid increase in the rate of maternal mortality is to be expected unless something can be done to check the consumption of a drink which, down the Commercial Road and in the Pennyfields district, is known as 'smoke'. This was very popular in America during the days of prohibition. It is really crude alcohol to which a little flavouring has been added. The English woman generally uses peppermint.

Eau-de-Cologne is another drink which is growing in favour. The sixpenny stores sell large bottles of eau-de-Cologne for quite legitimate purposes. They have no check on the use to which it is put.

Higher up in the social scale, i.e. among the lower middle classes, synthetic cocktails are having a success which surprises even their manufacturers. They bear no relation to a legitimate cocktail (if such an expression is not a contradiction in terms). They are made from the cheapest possible British wines, to which crude alcohol has been added, and only a liberal addition of synthetic fruit juice, or some other flavour, makes them drinkable at all.

In this connection I might quote a letter which was

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recently sent to me by one of the most distinguished dieticians in the country.

'Some time ago', he writes, 'the British Medical Association, disturbed by the great traffic in worthless patent medicines, published a book called *Secret Remedies*. It exposed the fact that many of the medicines most in vogue among the British public at the time (some of them are still flourishing to-day), were composed of cheap, useless and sometimes dangerous ingredients. For example, one popular obesity cure, which sold at half a crown, and had netted its proprietors many thousands of pounds, was composed of water, extract of lemon and a minute quantity of bicarbonate of soda.'

'It is high time that the Medical Association published a similar exposure of the "cocktails" which are flooding the British market to-day. If their consumers knew their composition and realized that they were, quite literally, impregnating their systems with strong doses of poison, they would never touch them again.'

I do not wish to paint an alarmist picture. But surely it is the duty of every public-spirited Englishman to acquaint himself with facts such as these, particularly since he is constantly subjected to propaganda which aims at making him forget them.

The public-spirited Englishman, for example, ought to know that last year, in this enlightened democracy, nearly ten per cent of the lunatics in our asylums were there as the direct result of chronic alcoholism. He ought to know that for the last five years every sort of crime, committed by drunkards, varying from common breach of the peace to criminal assault, cruelty to children, and murder, has been

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steadily increasing. He ought to know even such little details as the fact that only last year nearly five hundred people in this island died of cirrhosis of the liver. He ought to know other little details such as the fact that during the whole of the present decade there has been a steady rise in the number of crimes and deaths directly attributable to the drinking of methylated spirits. These spirits, when mixed with cheap wine, are comparatively potable. Their effects, according to General Higgins of the Salvation Army, are always the same, 'hallucinations, wild and uncontrollable outbreaks of passion and a terrible desire to destroy'.

These things may be details, but since we are so constantly informed, by our elders and betters, that the preservation of our health is one of our first social duties, and since we are surrounded by authoritarian states in which people are not only told things, but made to do them, these details assume a certain importance. You will not read them in the newspapers because, well you know the reason why.



## CHAPTER VII

### THE FLOCK AND THE FATHERS

#### I

It will have been evident, in the preceding chapters, that the 'national spiritual revival' to which we are called by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the other leaders of the Church, has not yet achieved any very startling results.

Of course the words 'spiritual revival' are somewhat vague. They are used, with bland assurance, by clerics who ignore the evidence of their eyes, and stare out beyond their empty pews into the world at large, where they find material from which they concoct misleading generalizations. They make vague gestures towards the radio, and when they see that the B.B.C. is broadcasting somebody's sermon on Sunday, assume that ten million people are listening to it when, in all probability, the majority have hastily switched over to the jazz band at Radio Normandie.

They see that articles on religion maintain their popularity in the national press, that the Bible maintains and even increases its sale, and that there is evidence (this is certainly true) of a widespread desire to believe in *something*. They do not realize that most of the articles on religion bear little more resemblance to orthodox Christianity than the articles on astrology which are offered, as an alternative, on the following page. They do not take the trouble to inquire how large a proportion of the Bible output is placed in the

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hands of ignorant natives, who exchange them for soap, cocoa and cigarettes. As to the desire to believe in *something*, they do not seem to understand that the very force of this desire is the strongest evidence in proof of the spiritual desert which it attempts so desperately to fill.

We cannot content ourselves, in this chapter, with comforting generalizations. We must again endeavour to be objective. Only by a constant reference to statistics can we gain any true indication of the state of the English Church.

### II

During the Easter week of 1933, 2,463,421 members of the Church of England took communion.

In 1934 this number had decreased by 4,308.

In 1935 there was a further decrease of 17,170, bringing the total down to 2,441,943.

That is the latest news we can give you, for I am informed by the secretary of the Archbishop's Evangelistic Committee that the figures for 1936 and 1937 'are not yet available'. It seems, to the layman, very strange indeed that at the end of 1937 the Church authorities should still be in ignorance of the number of its communicants early in 1936, but there it is. Although the information is vital, although it could easily be obtained in forty-eight hours, with a little organization, it is still 'not available' after a year and a half. It does not say very much for the Church's interpretation of the word 'evangelism'.

Nor does it give one much confidence in the suggestion, by the committee, that the decrease has 'probably' ceased.

## THE FLOCK AND THE FATHERS

Why has it probably ceased? What indications are there that 10,000 more people, every year, are not staying away from the Church's greatest celebration?

But though the number of communicants seems to be steadily decreasing, the number of candidates for confirmation is 'very encouraging', according to the same authority (the Archbishop's Evangelistic Committee). It has gone up from 184,000 in 1933 to 197,000 in 1935. (The statistics available to this lively little body again stop abruptly at 1935.) I suppose there is some justification for calling this 'very encouraging'. But it ceases to be quite so encouraging when we learn that even this high-water-mark of 197,000 is over 13,000 less than the average which prevailed during the decade up to and including 1927. Nor does it become nearly so encouraging when we reflect that in the great majority of cases, confirmation, like vaccination, or joining the O.T.C., is a matter in which parents acquiesce, rather than one on which they insist. To refuse to allow a boy to be confirmed would be thought as eccentric as to refuse to allow him to wear the regulation school cap. It might not cause him so much pain, but it would be an embarrassment. And so it goes on.

### III

No sooner had the proofs of the above section been corrected than the *Church of England Year Book* for 1936 burst upon an expectant world, at the beginning of 1937. I might have re-written what has gone before, but I will let it stand. For the new figures are an even more melancholy

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commentary on the true state of affairs than those we have already examined.

They show that during 1936 the number of confirmations has decreased by nearly 15,000, the number of Sunday School scholars by nearly 83,000, and even the number of Sunday School teachers has decreased by nearly 6,000.

*It also shows that during the last four years the number of Sunday School scholars has decreased by nearly a quarter of a million.*

There is very little 'encouragement' to be gained from these figures. It seems that the Archbishop's Committee was unduly optimistic. But though they make bitter reading, I would wager that the figures for 1937, if and when they are available, will read far more bitterly. I would wager that the statistics will show a sensational drop in every form of Church attendance. For 1937 was the year in which the whole of Christendom was shocked by a series of ecclesiastical *gaffes* which are, as far as I am aware, without parallel in history.

I refer, of course, to the Church's attitude towards the Abdication.

It began with the Archbishop of Canterbury's famous broadcast, with its derogatory references to the late King's friends. This is not the place to offer any comments on that broadcast. But it is the place to record the fact that, in the eyes of other countries, it completely destroyed the good impressions which had been previously created.

During the whole of the unfortunate affair of the abdication the world had watched England with sympathy and respect. A situation which in some countries might have led to bloodshed, and in others might have provided an exhibi-

## THE FLOCK AND THE FATHERS

tion of considerable vulgarity, was handled with dignity and restraint. It was felt that however decadent England might be, in some respects, at least she had kept her manners.

The Archbishop's broadcast changed all that. I have no doubt that it was delivered from a high sense of duty, after deep thought and prayer, with a full consciousness that it might be misinterpreted. The fact remains that it *was* misinterpreted. Almost universally. In the eyes of the vast majority of the English-speaking peoples it looked suspiciously like kicking a man when he was down.

The damage abroad was as nothing to the damage at home. Cruel jokes about the Archbishop circulated round the London Clubs, and made their way through society. It mattered not that these jokes were unjust and malicious . . . they stuck in people's minds. And just as this was being forgotten, other distinguished churchmen, with a lack of tact that was almost as confounding as their lack of charity, proceeded to enter into the fray. Bishops jumped up and down in their pulpits like Jacks-in-the-box, delivered themselves of sentiments so vitriolic that their congregations gasped for breath, and then subsided into the obscurity from which they should never have emerged. Country vicars preached angry sermons which caused so much strife among their flocks that meetings were held on the village green in protest. Every ecclesiastical oddity flooded the press with letters, and each letter was a nail in the coffin of active Christianity. Even as I write, the Bishop of an ancient British colony has seen fit to march into a newspaper office and tear down from the wall, with his own hands, two photographs of the unfortunate Duke. The fervour with which he performed this impertinence would have been more suitably exhibited on

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the steps of the Stock Exchange, where at least he would have been able to quote a sacred precedent. The fact that he has since come to his senses, and has published a sorely-needed apology, does not undo the harm caused by an action that was un-Christian, and completely inexcusable.

Is it any wonder that thousands of wavering churchmen, sickened by an example of such intolerance from the very people whose duty it is to forgive unto seventy times seven, should have turned away in disgust saying to themselves, 'If *that* is how the Church wants me to behave, I prefer to stay at home'? I am not out of touch with public opinion, and from all over the country I have overwhelming evidence that the attitude of the great ecclesiastical leaders during the abdication has struck a blow at the English Church from which only a miracle can cause it to recover.

And that is the reason why I prophesy that the *Church of England Year Book* for 1937, when our swift evangelists eventually publish it in 1940, will make bitter reading.

### I V

Only a miracle, I said.

Whence is that miracle to come?

From the Archbishop of Canterbury? It would indeed be desirable, but it is to be feared that any abnormal activity from this quarter might do more harm than good. In any case, he has already put in two years' hard work on the spiritual revival, and though it would be ungracious to regard this work as responsible for the decline, the statistics

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make it impossible to deny that it is, at least, coincident with it.

From the eighty-year old Bishop of London? I have crossed swords with this gentleman before, and have no desire to add to his troubles. But I cannot help observing that there is a certain irony in the fact that one of the reasons why he declines to retire is because he desires to build sixty-three new churches in Greater London. This means that even if he stays on for another ten years; he will have to build a new church every eight weeks. And though . . . as we are all aware from his prowess on the hockey field . . . he is man of remarkable constitution, it would seem that the efforts required for this superhuman task might, towards his ninetieth year, leave him with hardly enough superfluous energy for one church, let alone sixty-three new churches, and an embarrassing number of old ones.

From the younger generation? It seems unlikely. Not only are candidates for co-ordination becoming increasingly scarce, but a regrettable number of the newly ordained seem to think that their first duty is to the left wing of the Labour party and that the service of Christ can be left to look after itself. It is extremely unfortunate that these young ministers, whose experience of life is largely theoretical, should so constantly take their sermons from the gospel according to Saint Marx rather than the gospel according to Saint Mark. However, we can hardly be surprised at this tendency, in view of the example that is set for them by their elders and betters, of whom the present Dean of Canterbury is the most advanced apostle.

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### v

We shall not waste our time if we allow the spotlight of publicity to rest, for a moment, on the figure of the Dean. He is a man of considerable intellectual distinction. Not even his bitterest enemies have ever questioned the integrity of his convictions.

But how *can* a man of his intelligence and his honesty conceivably hold such convictions in view of the facts which are staring him in the face?

Consider these facts. Here is a man who is in a position to obtain the fullest information about contemporary Europe. He himself is in receipt of a nominal income of £2,000 a year. He enjoys the luxury of a charming residence in the city of Canterbury. On his desk, every day, is placed a neatly folded copy of *The Times*. If he chanced to open it, on the morning of April 16th, 1937, his kindly eye might have chanced upon the following extract . . .

'Under the twelve months' administration of the present Spanish Government over 4,000 priests have been murdered in cold blood; nuns have been stripped naked in the streets, outraged and murdered; churches, shrines, private chapels and religious statues have been desecrated with unspeakable obscenities and destroyed. The Cathedral of Valencia, the seat of the Government, has had a road driven through it which is in daily use.'

*The Times* is not usually considered to be a sensation sheet. Its reporting of the Spanish tragedy has been consistently moderate. When, therefore, it gives us a picture of Spanish republicanism beside which the crimes of

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Nero appear humane, we may assume that the nightmare is true.

What comment has the Dean to offer on this . . . the most savage assault for centuries on the Christianity which he serves?

He makes the following comment:

'A real religious note lies behind life in Republican Spain to-day.'

On my desk lies a book by a distinguished Catholic, who enjoys the respect of many equally distinguished Protestants. *Spanish Rehearsal*, by Arnold Lunn. The book is open at a page which tells the following fully authenticated story.

A priest was being led out to his death. He was bound. As he faced the executioners he said: 'I want to bless you. Please free my hands.'

A Red cut the rope, and then hacked off his hands.

'Bless us now,' he sneered.

And the priest did bless them, moving about his bleeding stumps until he died.<sup>1</sup>

There seems to me to be a 'real religious note' in *that* story. Is the Dean unable to hear it?

He went to Spain himself. He went to this tortured country, and he remained in it for nine whole days . . . or was it nineteen? It does not matter. For his mind appears to have been already made up. As they poured their propaganda into his ears he translated it into neat little generalizations with which to edify his congregation. He proclaimed: 'The determination to provide the utmost cultural as well as physical opportunities to all gives promise of the realization of a social order nearer to the intention of Christ than any-

<sup>1</sup> *Spanish Rehearsal*, by Arnold Lunn, Hutchinson.

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thing I have seen in Spain during any of my previous visits.'

Such a statement compels us to suggest that the man who made it *must* be ignorant of the elementary facts of the case. He *must*, for example, be ignorant of the fact that one of the first acts of the enlightened Valencia Government was to legalize prostitution. He *must* be ignorant of the fact that one of the chief ministers in that government proclaimed, amid public applause:

'Man comes not from God but from the beasts; that is why his reactions are those of a beast.'

If he is not ignorant of these facts how can he observe that there is 'a real religious note in Republican Spain to-day'?

I suppose we might have expected it of him. After all, his attitude towards Spain is precisely the same as his attitude towards Russia. Incredible as it may sound, he has stated, over and over again: 'The things I want my Church to stand for lie behind what Soviet Russia has done.' He has played a hundred variations on the theme that Russia is the most Christian country in Europe to-day.

What does it mean? Well . . . *what?*

'Religion is the opium of the People.' That stares you in the face, in gigantic letters, on hoardings all over Russia. The very idea of God, to the young Russian child, is ludicrous and slightly indecent. Does the Dean of Canterbury wish that slogan, 'Religion is the opium of the People', to be hung outside the doors of Canterbury Cathedral? And if not, which of us is incapable of understanding the English language . . . the Dean or I?

I make no apologies for losing my temper. I lose it not only as a Christian, but as a man who detests muddle-headedness. In the words of my old friend Sir Francis

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Lindley, a man who has rendered considerable services to modern England: 'The attitude of some of our highly-placed divines is stupefying, and to me personally, as a life-long member of the Church of England, revolting.'

The Dean of Canterbury has the courage to be a great leader. But how can he be a great leader if he steadfastly turns his back on the facts? The tragedy of it all is heightened by the fact that his example is being followed by so large a number of young clergymen. There are hundreds of youths who, having obtained inferior degrees at Oxford, have drifted, for lack of anything better to do, to some smug theological college. There, in complete ignorance of modern Europe, they have indulged in debates about the evils of Fascism. And at the end of the debate they frequently propose votes of thanks to the Dean of Canterbury for 'showing them the light'.

It is a pity . . . to put it at its lowest level . . . that these young fools do not realize that the Dean of Canterbury, and all the other disciples of Communist Christianity, are slowly but surely doing them out of their jobs.

I would like to quote one more story from Arnold Lunn's *Spanish Rehearsal*.

'A verger who showed me over Canterbury Cathedral told me that in Dean Farrar's day the police had to control the long queue of would-be worshippers, which extended far beyond the Cathedral into the street. "In those days," he said, "they preached the word of God. But this Dean of ours preaches Social Credit, and there are no queues to worry the police".'

In that story you will find one of the principal reasons for the increasingly rapid decline and fall of the English Church.

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### V I

Even so, at the risk of offending decent Christians, I would suggest that the mentality of which the Dean of Canterbury is the most flagrant example, is not the mentality which is most responsible for the Church's decay.

At least, the Dean is alive. He is somebody whom one can fight. A priest who persistently lifts his voice in praise of the men who are sworn to destroy his Master may not command our respect, but at least he commands our attention. But the vast majority of his fellows do not lift their voices at all. They mumble on and on, to congregations that grow daily more scanty and more fatigued.

Why? Is it because they, unlike the Communist Dean, are not supported by the pleasant consciousness of £2,000 a year?

That may have something to do with it. The Church of England's finances are . . . to say the least of it . . . odd. One might even say immensely odd, and oddly immense. Far be it from me to deface these pages with such wicked words as jiggery-pokery, though having done so, I find the contour of the word so attractive that I will let it stay. But though we will all admit that no jiggery-pokery (there we are again!) is in the smallest degree to be suspected, the suspicion remains that the Church's finances are, as we have said before, odd.

It seems to me, for example, odd that thousands of under-paid Durham miners pay toll to the Church on every ton of coal sent to the surface. It seems even odder when one reflects that this coal, directly or indirectly, helps to warm

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the proletarian protuberances of the Communist Dean.  
But we have had enough of him.

It seems odder still that a proportion of the Church's income should come from slum property in London. It is true that the Ecclesiastical Commissioners maintain that they are not legally responsible for this property (which is in Paddington), but one would have thought that they were at least morally responsible, and that if they could not insist on immediate improvements, they should return the rents to the Borough Council.

It is not as though the Church of England were a poor Church. It has an income in the neighbourhood of £16,000,000 a year. In the Commissioners' last report, Government and other securities were listed at £32,476,654 and cash assets at £34,516,233.

But though the Church's resources are more than adequate, its management of those resources is incomprehensible, whether we view it from the standpoint of the common Christian or of the ordinary business man. There are 4,000 benefices with less than £300 a year income, out of which heavy expenses have to be met. On the other hand, there are fat livings, with incomes up to £2,000 a year and only a handful of parishioners.

It was a similiar state of affairs in the secular world which led to the Reform Bill of 1832. In those days it was the 'rotten borough' which had to be eliminated, and it was not till this was done that representative government was anything more than a farce. A hundred years have passed, but the Church has still to follow the State's example, has still to eliminate its 'rotten parishes' if representative Christianity is to be even faintly worthy of its name.

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### VII

Let us take a look at one of these country parishes. We will not choose a rich one, for the great majority are terribly poor. And the great majority are in the hands of men who are far too old for their jobs. A brief perusal of the pages of *Crockford's Clerical Directory* will give you striking proof of the senility of the average country incumbent.

It is a depressing prospect. Modern youth needs direction. And in rural districts the only person available to give them that direction is the parson. In thousands of villages, all over the country, the local young people have become completely demoralized by the absence of any sort of guidance or discipline. 'Parson's in bed . . . parson's getting up, but he's so sick that he can only just crawl to church . . . parson's back in bed again.' And Mrs. Parson is so busy with her great barracks of a vicarage, so harassed by trying to keep up appearances, by panting after a lawn-mower to save the few shillings they used to pay to the odd man, by spending the morning on her knees staining the worn-out boards in the draughty hall, by giving tea to a few old gossips who stare with malicious pleasure at the faded curtains . . . so . . . oh, so sick of it all, that she can do nothing either.

So the village rots. The boys, who have nobody to form them into a club, stand on the village green, gaping like idiots, with fish-like mouths through which one sees the stumps of a few teeth. (The teeth of young England may not appear to you to be a pleasant topic, but it is certainly an important one. Our younger generation have the worst teeth in Europe. The smile of the average English village

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boy is not only nauseating in itself . . . it is a very apt comment on the abuse of *laissez-faire*.)

Not that the village boy has much to smile about. Motor up the Great North Road, or any other of the great roads, west, south, or east, and as you approach each village you will meet groups of youths, strolling along arm in arm, dressed in cheap blue suits, with cloth caps or bowler hats, and shoes that are too tight for them. They are hunch-backed, slovenly, and unutterably bored.

A young parson might possibly work a miracle with these boys, though nobody would deny that his task, at this stage of decay, would be a difficult one. But the young parsons are becoming scarcer and scarcer. And meanwhile the old men carry on.

Some of them are so feeble that they can hardly sign their names to a document. Yet they must totter out of bed in the early morning, in physical pain, shiver their way into a draughty church, gabble through the communion service and proffer the cup with such trembling hands that the worshipper dreads lest the wine is spilt.

They ascend their pulpits, coughing and wheezing. They stare out at their sad little congregations with eyes so tired that they can hardly see. And then, in quavering tones, they read a discourse that might have been interesting to a theological student thirty years ago, but is completely incomprehensible to a rustic audience.

I am not, I hope, making easy sport of men whose lives have often been hard, monotonous and embittering. It is pity rather than anger that stirs one's heart as one sees these relics of a past age hanging on so desperately to an office for which they are no longer fitted.

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But the times are too dangerous for pity. The race is too swift. In England we are racing faster and faster in the wrong direction. And while the humble old parsons can do no more than wave their hands in feeble protest, before they fall exhausted by the wayside, their richer brothers, their spiritual superiors, are in the vanguard of the rout, urging us on to a precipice which holds for us the same fate as it held for the herds of the Gadarenes.

## CHAPTER VIII

### STUDY IN RED

#### I

It is high time that we had a little light relief.

Strange to relate we shall find it among those very people who, according to the Dean of Canterbury, are the only fit rulers of this Empire . . . the British Bolsheviks.

It is extremely difficult to obtain precise statistics of communist activity in this country. All that one can safely say is firstly, that Russia is spending a great deal of money on communist propaganda, and secondly that she is spending it so inefficiently that the results are in no way proportionate to the outlay.

There is only one communist member of parliament. There were only two communist candidates at the last election, for whom only 27,117 votes were cast. Even in the distressed areas the communists are regarded with distrust and a certain contempt.

After all, the last two years has given the communists a good deal to explain away. The wholesale slaughter of the chief disciples of Bolshevism, at the command of Stalin, has been an unpleasant setback to British Bolshevism.

Stalin is practically the only one of the eminent men who surrounded Lenin who has not been either shot or 'liquidated'. Zinoviev, Kamanev, Rykov, Bukharin, Radek,

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Sokolnikov, Piatakov, Yevdokimov, Smirnov, Tomsky, Serebriakov, all have gone. Trotsky is in exile. As Arnold Lunn has remarked, in words which must have made some people very uncomfortable . . .

*'There was only one Judas among the twelve apostles. If Stalin is to be believed, there were ten Judases among the first twelve apostles of communism. If St. Peter had "liquidated" as a traitor to Christianity every apostle save one, what would have happened to Christianity?'*

### I I

We promised some light relief. But first we must set the stage, and throw the limelight on to some of the favourite 'props' of British communism.

*'The Communist Party of Great Britain is a section of the Communist International and is bound by its decisions.'* This is a quotation from the party rules, and may presumably be taken to mean what it says. It is an important point, because the suggestion that any British party is 'taking its orders from Moscow' is greeted by the communist intellectuals with titters of contempt. The titterers prove nothing except that the titterers are ignorant of the first principles of the party which they admire.

The official organ of the party is the *Daily Worker*. This is a small, hysterical sheet, well worthy of study. It is a good example of the way in which all news can be distorted to fit the communist theory. If a lorry-driver were to run over a child, the accident would not be reported, because

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the lorry-driver is a 'worker'. If a 'gentleman' were to run over a child, the accident would be given big headlines, and the impression would be left that he had done it on purpose.

As far as I am aware, the *Daily Worker* has not yet attributed the vagaries of the British climate to capitalism. I offer the idea to them. It would be excellent propaganda to suggest that a capitalist cyclone was hovering over the North Sea, endeavouring to dispel the rays of the communist sun. And it would be as near to the truth as most of the news that they do print.

The *Daily Worker* pays slavish homage to everything Russian. Its pages are adorned with somewhat blurred photographs of Moscow Venuses and Moscow Apollos. It publishes cartoons of the Duke of Windsor and other celebrities which, for sheer malice, can only be compared with the cartoons of King George V with which *Simplicissimus* regaled its readers during the war. Its paragraphs are plastered with the word 'Comrade', often employed with unconscious humour. 'I wouldn't be seen dead in the same ditch with Comrade Cohen' may not be a literal transcription from its correspondence columns, but it is a very fair reflection of them.

It is a very funny little paper. That is at once its weakness, and our salvation. However ardently the publishers and editors of the Left may argue, at lunch, in favour of those economists (mercifully distant!) who would find it so difficult to reconcile their *consommé* with their convictions, the fact remains that Bolshevism is a humourless creed, and is not therefore likely to commend itself to the British worker.

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However vivid the imagination of the aforesaid publishers and editors, dreaming of that happy land (from the comparative squalor of the Savoy Grill), it would be difficult to believe that the British workman would fail to see the joke of a procession of small urchins, marching down the Strand with a banner bearing the inscription: 'Give us technical power!' That is considered very inspiring in Russia, but it does not quite fit into Cockney London.

Nor, to ascend the social scale, can one think that the medical students of Bart's Hospital would be unaware of the humour of an essay entitled 'For Purity of Marxist-Leninist Theory in Surgery' which recently appeared in the highly estimated journal *Marxist-Leninist Natural Science*. And even the reddest school-teacher might find himself threatened by a spontaneous contraction of the diaphragm (Bergson's definition of laughter), if he were suddenly told to teach arithmetic on the principles of the celebrated author of *For Party Spirit in Mathematics*.

'Add a capitalist 2 to a communist 6. Divide the result by a Trotskyite 4. What is the answer?' Whatever the answer may be in Russia, I have a shrewd suspicion that in England it would be a lemon.

This complete humourlessness of Russian communism is more important than might at first be apparent. A party that cannot share in a nation's laughter is not likely to strike roots deep into that nation's soil. It may cause a great deal of damage, it may have a considerable power to demoralize, but it is never likely to dominate.

I might write a long and ponderous essay, bristling with statistics, to support my contention that communism will never make any great appeal to the electorate of this country,

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but it would bore me as much as it would bore you. Besides, we have still to enjoy the light relief which was promised earlier in this chapter.

And so we will go to a play instead. A Bolshevik play, running to crowded audiences in the heart of London. Few Englishmen are aware that this sort of thing exists in their country. The majority, if they paid the theatre a visit, would feel astonished that it had not been raided by the police. I hope that my exposure will not cause the authorities to intervene. Because, really, they would be depriving us of a very good joke.

### III

If ever there was a district where communism might claim an excuse for breeding, and breeding with violence, it is in the slums round King's Cross. You do not notice them, as you hurry out of the station on your way from the North. You only see ugly shops, and ugly pubs, and ugly trams, and such a general embarrassment of ugliness that you jump into a taxi as quickly as possible and close your eyes until you have arrived in some district less painful to the vision.

But if you were to wander about a little, and turn down some of the smaller streets, you would be assailed by squalor on all sides. And this squalor, which exudes from every narrow alley, and drifts in a smell of stale poverty through every dark, shabby window, is somehow enhanced by the advertisements which plaster the walls . . . posters painting the delights of foaming ale, the merits of rich creamy milk,

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and ironically enough, the desirability of spending your summer holidays at breezy Brightstone.

In this mournful district, the Progress Theatre Club X has its premises, and it is not surprising that most of its members are ardent reds. You may judge the quality of the plays they present by the advertisements and the photographs outside the entrance. 'The Red Dawn' . . . 'Melody in Moscow' . . . 'Cupid under Capitalism' . . . that is the sort of thing. And if you study the photographs you will gain the impression that this, at least, is a stronghold of the Left, where words are not minced, and where it would be highly inadvisable to appear in an Old Etonian tie.

For this reason I decided to pay a visit to one of its most advanced performances. It was a play which we will call *The Savages*.<sup>1</sup> It has created a minor sensation in communist circles.

After considerable difficulty I managed to discover, among my acquaintances, a communist with a sense of humour. Some days later we found ourselves climbing up a flight of stairs, into a hall that was packed with excited men and women, all of them wearing, in some guise or other, the scarlet symbol of revolution.

The play was just beginning. Let us watch it.

Three Evil Geniuses of Capitalism are wrecked on a desert island. They are . . .

Firstly, a bishop. For some reason which the dramatist has not made apparent, he is clothed in a top-hat, a frock-coat, gaiters, and a pair of short white pants.

Secondly, a policeman, who appears throughout the play in a heavy suit of underwear.

<sup>1</sup> A synonym.

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Thirdly, a financier. He affects a mackintosh and a walking-stick.

One gathers, from certain lurid hints, that both the mackintosh and the walking-stick have been employed . . . (in a manner which the brain is unable to discern) . . . to grind the faces of the poor.

These three persons, representing the Church, the Law, and Finance, are confronted by natives of such sweetness and light that any member of the Fairchild Family, placed by their sides, would appear as a monster of lust and depravity.

The natives never have an evil idea in their heads. Not they! They never fight, they never lie, they never steal. All they do is to think long, lovely thoughts about hibiscus blossoms. And when they want to eat, they just nip up a bread-tree (which wobbles about in the middle of the stage throughout the drama), and snap off a few juicy loaves of bread.

It is a picture of native life which is not instantly recognized by those of us who have had the opportunity, or the misfortune, to travel off the beaten track. We might suggest that, even without the aid of a highly developed capitalist system, there were a few, just a few, natives in Abyssinia whose minds did not dwell exclusively on the delicacy with which they could arrange crocuses in the hair of the village belle. Just a few who had not lived solely on lettuces, honey-dew and milk from an ample and obliging goat. Just a few who, if confronted with a steak cut from the tenderer portions of their maternal uncle, might . . . shall we say . . . show a tendency (hastily checked, of course) to lick their lips?

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But one must not allow such thoughts to distract us from the Beauty of the Drama. For the natives are about to be 'corr-r-upted by capitalism'. And never was any corruption carried out more thoroughly. It is terrific.

Every ancient device that has ever helped a melodrama to creak through four acts is employed to hasten this corruption. The village belle is seduced under the bread-tree, before you can say 'knife'. The bishop, of course, is delighted by this little unpleasantness, and takes the opportunity to deliver a number of generalizations about the state of holy matrimony.

In the meantime, the financier has got busy and has floated a company round the bread-tree (which is still doing its best to collapse). This nefarious action has the worst results. You may remember that in the old days the natives were in the habit of darting up the tree, with gay laughter, to pluck their bread for nothing. But now, they have to toil up in chains, and give their bread to the financier, who seizes it, and if possible, whacks them on the head with it.

As for the policeman, he is here, there, and everywhere. No sooner does he see a nice clean girl, dreaming about hibiscus blossom, than he whisks her off to gaol for loitering. (Much hissing among the intelligentsia at this sally.) No sooner does he see a mother, clutching a baby to her breast, than he outs with his truncheon and makes her scurry round the bread-tree (which almost falls down with shock).

And love . . . love is driven out. Utterly. For ever. And is replaced . . . (can you guess it?) . . . by Prostitution. Instead of lying on banks of hibiscus, in positions to which

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the most prudish producer of classical dancers could not object, the wretched native women are swept hurriedly into a cave, where they await the attentions of the financier.

At least, they *would* be swept off hurriedly if the stage-carpenter (obviously a *bourgeois*) had not inadvertently made the cave too narrow, thereby obliging the unhappy women to make a less poignant exit through the Number One Tabs.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the theme of *The Savages*. The best that the extreme Left can do in the way of drama. I have been very kind to this play. I have added not a single line of caricature to its ridiculous face. If one were to take it seriously one would say: 'God help the theatre if communism ever comes to England.' But one cannot take it seriously. And if you will read on, I will tell you why.

### I V

Here, in this theatre, there is a mystery.

Or perhaps I should not dignify it by such a resonant word. Perhaps I should say just . . . an incongruity.

It is so difficult to explain. If you had been sitting beside me, on this fantastic evening, it would not have been necessary to explain at all. You would have sensed it, as I sensed it.

You would have sensed this incongruous atmosphere of . . . respectability.

The whole performance gave an impression of immaculate propriety.

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### Why?

I can only assume that it was because the dramatist was English, the actors were English, and the audience (with the exception of certain Polish gentlemen who were obviously in the fur trade) was English. And because England has an eternal genius for mellowing. A genius for taking the rough edges off revolution. For clothing the ruins of systems in words of comfort, as the ruins of her castles are clothed in the soft arms of her native ivy.

That is a muddled explanation of the mystery, but it will have to do. All through that evening there was a strange sense of being at a village concert in an old-fashioned English parish. The fat old lady in the front row . . . surely that must be Lady Broadacres? And at the end of the performance, will she not climb rather laboriously on to the platform, to make her annual little speech about how glad we all are that the evening has been so successful, and that yet another sum of £8 17s. 9d. . . . (applause) . . . will be available for the repair of the church organ? And surely she is wearing that bright red scarf round her shoulders for no other reason than that she has been staying out too late, cutting off dead flowers in the rose-garden?

It is the same on the stage. The cruder the propaganda, the bloodier the threats, the more intensely respectable does it all appear. Although the bishop in shorts is mouthing blasphemies, one is convinced that it is only the local vicar, who has gone a little astray with his lines. And though the policeman in pants is accusing the British Empire of every known and unknown crime, he looks so like a nice, healthy farm boy, and is so obviously enjoying this opportunity of wearing a false moustache, that one feels, paradoxically,

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that he is really making a speech in favour of the local squire, who is standing in the Conservative interest. As for the financier, he kicks the natives with such relish that one is convinced that he is longing for a job in Kenya Colony, where he may have a chance of repeating his role in real life. It makes one almost sad to think that if he gets it, a paternal imperial government will gently but firmly order him to keep his boots to himself.

### v

I was so enchanted by my evening that I decided to continue my investigations, and to take the first opportunity which presented itself of renewing my acquaintance with the comedians of Cockney communism. I had not long to wait. One night, glancing through the pages of the *Daily Worker*, I saw the advertisement of a meeting in a suburban town hall. Miss T., it appeared, would speak on 'Russia Revisited', and all 'comrades' were cordially invited.

I called for a cocktail, drank it, and asked Gaskin if I were dressed in a sufficiently comradely manner.

He gave me a disapproving glance.

'Certainly, sir.'

'I think a red tie, don't you?'

He went and got a lot of red ties. I chose one.

'That is a Hawes and Curtis tie, sir,' he observed, in a tone that might well be described as flat.

'They won't know that.'

'No, sir?'

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Feeling slightly damped by the note of interrogation in his voice, I set out.

A little later, I was climbing another flight of dark stairs, opening a door, and seeing . . .

The very same parish meeting that I had seen in the Progress Theatre. Of course, the audience was different, but the atmosphere was identical.

I am bound to admit that this time I was a little disappointed. I had assumed that the audience at the theatre was exceptional, that the disciples of the drama were not representative of the fiercer spirits of British Bolshevism. I was apparently mistaken.

Why, for instance, had nobody noticed the incongruity of the picture which hung over my head? It was a large picture, and it stared the speaker in the face. If I had been that speaker, I should first have been forced to draw a veil over that picture. Or if not a veil, a very opaque red flag. For the picture was a representation, in stark Victorian detail, of the Charge of the Light Brigade. And underneath, inset in a sort of lithographic haze, was a picture of Queen Victoria herself.

What an insult! What an outrageous affront! A capitalist war, and a capitalist queen! A capitalist charge, celebrated in capital poetry by a capitalist poet! How, in the face of this shaming testimony, can the speaker wax so lyrical about the Park of Rest and Culture in Moscow?

Nevertheless, she does. She is a lady with a Cambridge accent (and the Cambridge accent is a good deal thicker than the Oxford), and she is saying a lot of charming things about the Park of Rest and Culture, which she pronounces

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Pawk of Rest and Cultuah. She says things about it which make it sound like a strange mixture of a garden city and the conventional paradise of Mahomet.

'It is difficult for all of us, in a capitalist city,' she says, 'to realize to the full the spirit of the Pawk of Rest and Cultuah.'

She fixes me with a vaguely suspicious eye. I wonder if she has realized that my tie cost half a guinea. Anyway, *she* is wearing a tailor-made that looks much more like Molyneux than Moscow, so I should worry.

'The Pawk of Rest and Cultuah,' she continues, 'may not be all that the workers intended it to be, *materially*. I admit that there may not always be enough benches to go round' . . . (she smiles icily) . . . 'though the Russian worker's life is so full, so varied, that he has little desire to loll about in despair, like his English comrade . . . but the spirit of the Pawk of Rest and Cultuah is one that we would do well to emulate.'

Actually, of course, it is a noisy, dusty little plot in which undernourished Bolshevik children play marbles, and undernourished Bolshevik bands play Strauss. It is the sort of place which, in a sordid capitalist city, would be regarded with disgust by respectable citizens, who would write to the local papers and protest.

I think of Kensington Gardens. In the spring, with the sunlight dancing through the silver birches. And the statue of Peter Pan, and lots of fat little boys falling about on the grass. And spaniels barking hysterically.

All very wrong, of course. The fat little boys, as we all know, have breakfasted on the workers' blood. And the capitalist spaniels, we are equally aware, constantly interrupt

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their barking in order to take large, fierce bites out of the corpses of the unemployed, which are thickly strewn all over the grass. And yet, as the lady with the Cambridge accent continues to eulogize the Pawk of Rest and Cultuah, with its huge posters of Stalin, and its loud-speakers blaring propaganda, and its highly-organized health parades and cultural games, I feel I would rather have an hour, in rags, in Kensington Gardens, than a lifetime in shorts, in that proletarian pawk.

However, the speech is not what really interests me about this meeting of British Bolsheviks. It is the audience. And the environment.

Everybody is well-fed. Tidy. Slightly smug. One feels that if one were to repeat, even diffidently, the limerick that begins: 'There was a young lady of Exeter' . . . the response would be far from warm. The ingenuity of the rhymes, one feels, would not be appreciated. And the embarrassment of the young lady from Exeter (so acutely portrayed in the last line), would be attributed, however obscurely, to the capitalist system, and not to the boisterousness of man.

You see, most of the men have beards. Very damping. The old men have long beards, very clean, and the young men have short beards, also very clean.

The young women have, obviously, never known love. They have embraced Russia in a sort of frenzy of sexual repression. (Admittedly, I am generalizing, but there is truth in this impressionism.)

As for the old women, they were the biggest surprise of all. Nothing could have been more unexpected than their presence here . . . it was almost surrealist. Three old ladies,

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the 'Dear Old Things' of a hundred capitalist drawing-rooms, heavily hung with velvet and filigree, crowned with the toques of the dark ages before the Red Dawn, the fine flower of centuries of iron-heeled capitalism, there they sat, blinking and twittering, and, wonder of wonders, planted brazenly on each impregnable bosom was a red rosette, of a magnificence enough to make any shire horse piebald with envy.

I had had enough.

The joke had suddenly begun to pall.

When I came to the meeting, I had not the faintest intention of creating a scene. I had merely wanted to sit back and make notes.

But when the meeting was thrown open to the general public, when questions were asked, and when, in reply to one of the questions, the lady from Cambridge blandly assured a bearded young man that in Moscow a 'worker's' wife bought a mink coat as nonchalantly as a British woman bought a cotton apron, I could stand it no longer.

I found myself standing on my feet. The following dialogue then took place.

### V I

MYSELF. (*Knees knocking together with capitalist irritation*) Do you believe in liberty?

MISS T. (*Nose growing red with communist frenzy*) What do you mean by liberty?

MYSELF. I mean the ability to say, or write, or sing, or

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otherwise express, exactly what I think, when, where and how I like.

MISS T. (*Gulping a glass of water*) Yes. That is to say . . .

MYSELF. (*Knees doing castanets*) Do you?

MISS T. (*Verging on magenta*) Yes.

MYSELF. In that case, perhaps you will kindly answer this question.

COMRADE. Order! Order!

MYSELF. (*With icy surprise, such as Grand Dukes used to show when the moujiks did not press their stomachs into the snow with sufficient alacrity*) I was about . . . I say about . . . to ask a question.

MISS T. (*Deep magenta*) Let him ask it.

MYSELF. (*Still icy*) In that case, will you kindly tell me if I should be allowed to get up in the Red Square at Moscow, blackguard the Soviet Government, and receive the protection of the Soviet police, in the same way that you are allowed to get up in this room, blackguard the British Government and receive the protection of the British police?

There was a terrible silence. Nobody moved.

'I am still waiting for an answer,' I said.

Suddenly, from a corner, a young man with a beard that contrasted oddly with his shrill voice, screamed, 'All that would happen in Moscow is that you would be certified as insane!'

The tension was broken. There was loud applause. The old ladies nodded and beamed. The Cambridge lady patted her hair and tossed her head. The bearded young men slapped each other on the back.

I stood there staring at them. I suddenly felt very tired

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and unhappy. Better to go away. I picked up my hat. With an ironic bow, somebody opened the door. I went out. As I stood in the doorway, watching the cheerful, noisy crowds jostling each other on the pavements, I felt that I knew how a prisoner must feel as he steps from the shadow of his cell and feels the sunlight once more upon his face.



## CHAPTER IX

# HOME OF LOST CAUSES

### I

OUR search for red revolution in modern England has not, so far, been very successful.

Admittedly, we have had plenty of evidence to show us that there is a widespread sympathy for the *theory* of communism. We have seen comfortable clerics in cathedral cities making ardent speeches in favour of the only two countries who have made atheism the religion of the state, but we have not yet seen any clerics who take off their collars, or return their incomes to the state. We have seen prosperous publishers doing their utmost to undermine the fabric of society which supports them, but since their fulminations have been interrupted by the popping of champagne corks at the Savoy Grill, we have not been impressed.

Perhaps we have been searching in the wrong place?

Lord Haldane once said that: 'It is in universities that the soul of a people mirrors itself.' Perhaps, instead of wandering about the poorer streets of London, we would have been more profitably employed in taking the train to Oxford? After all, whenever revolution stalks through the streets of a foreign city we are always informed that 'students' are to the fore. In Cairo, it is invariably the 'students' who barricade the bridges over the Nile and wave flags in the stolid

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faces of the British Grenadiers. In Lisbon, when the trams fall over (which is very often), and block the street, and form a convenient platform for fiery orators, we always find that the 'students' are prominent in the entertainment. 'Students', always 'students', marching through the troubled streets of Europe. They march so much that one wonders how they ever find time to read. If I took all that exercise, I should be singularly ill-informed.

However, since the word 'student' has become a symbol of unrest, of revolt, and sometimes of resurrection, we might do worse than pay a visit to Oxford, in order to see how it sounds when delivered with the celebrated Oxford accent. And quite frankly, we might be almost relieved if we discovered that here it had the same challenging ring as when it is cried in the streets of Vienna, of Prague, and even . . . though somewhat *sotto voce* . . . in the arcades of Milan. We have not yet heard anybody get very excited about anything at all, in modern England. A little energy would come as a welcome change.

### II

We will start our pilgrimage in the Oxford Union Society.

The Oxford Union is probably the most famous debating society in the world. To become its president is the highest ambition of every undergraduate with a taste for politics. Among the past holders of this office are Prime Ministers, Lord Chancellors, Archbishops, Viceroys . . . and an occasional oddity like myself.

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The Oxford Union is supposed to be a barometer which shows what young England is thinking. Some of its debates are given more publicity, throughout Europe, than the debates in the House of Commons. For instance, the famous occasion when the Union passed a resolution, by a large majority, 'that the members of this house will not fight for King and country'.

But you never can tell with young England. Particularly if you attempt to judge its mentality by the Oxford Union. For Oxford is still 'the home of lost causes'. True, there is nothing new about that. She always was. But in this year of 1938, when the wheels of commerce, of construction and destruction, of every activity of man, are revolving with a velocity which is terrifying to all thinking men, the paradox of Oxford's lethargy becomes all the more startling. She is like a tortoise on a race-course.

Many of us love her for it. We think all the more tenderly of those spires, dreaming on, dreaming on, while the moonlit sky is slashed with the bat-like wings of aeroplanes. Of the crocuses blooming so primly, so regularly, in the walks of Magdalen, while all around, a world is crashing, and the air is thick and dusty with its fall. Of dons in ancient dining-halls, sipping pale sherry, and commenting so charmingly upon its bouquet, while far away, new armies, drunk with new wine, are carving new designs on the weary surface of this old world.

It is all very delectable.

At the same time, it is all very dangerous.

And now we can start on our pilgrimage. At the Reading Room of the Union Society, Oxford, England, 1938.

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### III

I opened the door. There were five people in the room. Two were very old clergymen, the other three were undergraduates. The old clergymen were both snoring. I am sure that they had been snoring ever since I left, in the early nineteen twenties. Of the three undergraduates, one was an Indian, who looked up in alarm from the cross-word puzzle of *The Times*, as though an animated anagram had suddenly walked into the room. The second was yawning over an old copy of the *Illustrated London News*. The third was yawning over nothing, and was rather sulkily watching the second, waiting till he had finished with the *Illustrated London News*, which, for reasons best known to himself, he appeared to covet.

It was obvious that any man who stayed long in this atmosphere would fall fast asleep, but I did not want to leave until I had peered round to see if there were any indications of a new spirit. Ah . . . here was something! A new magazine.

'*The Oxford Guardian*. (Published each Tuesday during Term under the auspices of the Oxford University Liberal Club.)'

I happened to be one of the original founders of the Oxford University Liberal Club. I not only chose a large number of its principles, but I also chose its curtains and its carpets, which were of the same colour . . . a chaste but hopeful grey. I therefore began to read the magazine with interest, particularly as the leading article was entitled: 'A Change of Outlook'.

But as I read, my head began to nod. Not only was there

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no evidence of a change of outlook, but there was every evidence that the sleepy complacency which had eventually led me to resign from the Liberal party, years ago, had noticeably increased. There were the same old phrases announcing 'a revival of liberalism' . . . a revival which, however desirable, is illusory. There were the same old sighs for the return of 'free trade' . . . sighs which sounded as though they came from another world, in this age of economic nationalism. (It was significant that one of the gossip paragraphs told of a week-end party in Cobden's old house, and was proudly headed 'Under the Shadow of Cobden', as though Cobden had anything more to say to the modern world than Crippen.) There was even . . . irony of ironies . . . a message from that little elf of Liberalism, Lloyd George. The message seemed to echo from an immense distance, but the voice, though somewhat cracked, was authentic. Speaking of the present government, he proclaimed . . . 'they have wrecked the world's hopes of peace and disarmament, and sent it reeling down a Gadarene slope to ruin'. This, from the principal creator of that first charter of the Gadarenes, the Treaty of Versailles, was a little too much to bear. So I put the magazine away. As I did so I noticed a little news item on the back page. 'Rumour has it that Greta Garbo is about to join the Liberal party.'

Doubtless to satisfy the desire to be alone.

## I V

Our tour continues. The reader must again be reminded that he is walking through the halls of a Society which,

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according to popular tradition, is the centre of young English political thought, that every undergraduate he passes is a potential member of parliament. Let us therefore descend to the debating hall, and bend over the minute book of the Society, in order to see which of the many vital problems of this distracted world have been chosen as subjects of discussion.

Here, taken at random from the minute book, are a few of them.

'That this House wishes its ancestors had emigrated to America.'

'That Oxford is a rotten borough.'

'That this House refuses to believe that all the world's a stage.'

'That sport is either murder or suicide.'

'That the substitution of this House for the House of Commons would be of great benefit to the nation.'

'That this House proclaims its undying faith in politicians.'

'That Utopia will be a republic.' Etc. etc.

We may be pardoned if we feel puzzled. Far be it from us to suggest that the minds of the very young should be directed exclusively towards the ponderous, but there is a levity about these subjects (which form a large proportion of the 'problems' for discussion), which seems to indicate that those who framed them are not even interested in the current affairs of the world. As topics for essays by schoolboys, they might pass, though one would assume that they had been set by a very dull teacher. But as themes for an evening's debate by minds that are, in all essentials, adult, they are beneath contempt.

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Perhaps, however, the debates invest these paltry subjects with an importance that is not inherent in them? Perhaps, like Socrates meditating on a piece of thistledown, these young men can weave a mighty theme around a minute fact? Let us go and see.

### v

The debating hall is fairly full. Even so, it looks empty enough, when I compare the attendance with the sort of attendance we used to have in the old days.

'Private business' is just beginning, and as usual the officers are being asked questions whose main purpose is to raise a laugh. As I listen to these questions I try to think of some of the hundreds of questions which I have asked and answered, as a private member and an officer, in the past. They sounded very funny at the time. What would they sound like to-day?

I can only remember one. It was a question addressed to the then President, Mr. Leslie Hore-Belisha, who is now Secretary for War. I happened to notice, on the Sunday preceding the debate, that his name was twice mis-spelt in our two principal Sunday newspapers. I therefore asked the President the following question:

'Sir, in view of the fact that in last Sunday's *Observer* you were described, in your capacity as President of this Society, as Leslie Hare-Beliska, and in the *Sunday Times* of the same date, as Leslie Nore-Belishat, will you kindly inform the Society what steps you propose to take against these two newspapers for their unwarranted attempt to deprive this

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university of one of its most cherished philological phenomena?

Far be it from me to suggest that this question is worthy of being dragged up from the past, but at least it made people laugh at the time. But at these questions to which we are listening to-night, nobody is laughing. They are the same sort of questions, but nobody seems even interested.

The debate begins.

The motion before the House is: 'That there are Too Many Books.' A feeble motion, you will agree, but one which is, at least, arguable. It could be debated from the point of view of the Tory who considers that 'education is the curse of the working-classes', or of the authoritarian who wishes the public to read only what the state commands, or in a lighter vein, of an author who is alarmed by the ever-increasing flood of books against which he has to compete.

But as the debate proceeds, it is evident that none of the speakers has the least intention of referring to the motion at all. I become more and more puzzled. If any young man in my time had made such a speech as that which I am now hearing, I should have told him either to stick to the motion or to sit down.

Or is it really I who have changed? Quite honestly, I think not. For example, the speaker who is now before me is not attempting to disguise the fact that he is reading every word of his speech. He holds up the manuscript as if he were proud of it. Not for one word does he stray from this manuscript, not even the most pitiful attempt at debate does he make. No such practice would have been tolerated for five minutes in the days which I knew.

Well, well, this probably makes dreary reading. It sug-

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gests that I am writing with one foot in the grave and the other in a mustard-bath. So we will leave this sad exhibition, and as we wander out into the deserted garden we will try not to reflect, too pessimistically, on the future of our country if the young men, drawling away inside, are to be numbered among its future legislators.

### V I

The suggestion that I am writing with one foot in the grave, even though I made it myself, is inclined to rankle. And as we are approaching an aspect of Oxford life which is apt to arouse heated controversy, we will, in a few moments, call in some witnesses from the younger generation.

The reason we shall need these witnesses is because we are going to suggest that drunkenness, among modern Oxford undergraduates, has reached a stage when it ceases to be funny. And if one makes accusations of that nature, one must be prepared to support them with adequate evidence.

When I was at Oxford people didn't drink very heavily. There were occasional celebrations when we had too much beer, and there was an awful young man at Magdalen who was reputed to drink methylated spirits out of a large black coffee cup. But on the whole we were a sober lot. Most of us were poor, anxious to work, and desperately in earnest about the new world which, as we pathetically believed, was being built for us.

To-day it is different. Generalizations are dangerous, and statistics, even if they were available, would be misleading.

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But on the various occasions in recent years when I have attended parties at Oxford I have seen more drink consumed in a few evenings than during my whole period as an undergraduate. You call on a man at eleven o'clock in the morning and he automatically produces a bottle of sherry and fills your glass before you have time to inform him that sherry, at eleven a.m., is not one of those things which, in your opinion, adds to the gaiety of life. You call on people for tea and you find them drinking whiskies and soda. As for the cocktail parties, particularly those parties which are largely attended by hard-mouthing débutantes who have swept up from London, the only parallel I can suggest for them is the sort of party which was fashionable in New York, during the days of prohibition, when the butler's principal occupation was to carry young women upstairs, and lay them on beds with wet towels round their heads.

In case I am accused of libel and slander I will shelter behind a witness whose word can hardly be questioned, Mr. Keith Briant. Mr. Briant, who left Oxford only last year, was editor of the most important Oxford undergraduate journal, the *Isis* . . . a position which I once held myself. The editor of the *Isis* has as good a chance as any undergraduate of getting a bird's-eye view of the activities of the university. He has to go everywhere and see everybody, and it is very important that he should keep himself, as far as possible, unprejudiced.

Mr. Briant has recently produced a book called *Oxford Limited*,<sup>1</sup> which should have made a much greater sensation than it did. In this book he describes a pretty little custom called 'The Freshmen's Blind'. I never heard of any such

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Limited*, by Keith Briant. Michael Joseph Ltd. 10s. 6d.

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custom before. It is, as far as I know, a new idea. According to Mr. Briant (who has not been contradicted) 'The Freshmen's Blind' has already been adopted by a large number of colleges.

The idea of this 'Blind' is for the second year men to give a party to the Freshmen, and to make them drunk. It seems to me silly and unpleasant, even when it is described in such mild terms as that. But Mr. Briant (who is very far from being a prig) does not describe it in mild terms at all. After telling us how the Freshmen, most of them straight from school, had been assembled in a room which was almost completely bare, and how they had been primed with intoxicants such as whisky, gin, sherry, beer, Malaga, Advokaat, and Cointreau, we are given the following picture of the result.

'By the fireplace, a group of Freshmen were being instructed in the verses of a bawdy song, which seemed of epic length. Their faces registered varying expressions of alcoholic appreciation. All of us were trying to look as much like men of the world as we could, and endeavouring to give the impression that such evenings were of common occurrence. We must have looked uncommonly funny. Glasses showed a tendency to fall from their owners' hands to the floor.'

'By eleven o'clock the room was a shambles. Someone had put his hand through one of the windows. The floor below was bespattered with blood and whisky. The noise was deafening; the gramophone alternatively whined and screamed. One man was singing an interminable song in a corner with only himself as audience; two or three Freshmen were lying on the floor. A number had already been carried

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to bed. The floor was littered with broken glass and empty bottles. One of the hosts was instructing a Freshman in the delicate art of relieving himself through a window. Two others had not passed the stage of bellicosity.'

It is very easy for us to sneer at the German universities, with their practice of duelling, which I should be the first to condemn as dangerous and childish. But if we are talking about things which are dangerous and childish, we can hardly deny that Mr. Briant has given us an example of an Oxford custom which merits both those adjectives quite as strongly as any of the activities of Heidelberg.<sup>1</sup>

## VII

It might have been thought, by the chivalrous and the optimistic, that the admission of women to the university would have had a restraining influence on some of the wilder spirits. So far is this from being the case, it would seem that ever since women arrived on the scene, manners have deteriorated. There may, or may not, be any connection between these two facts. On the whole, I should think there were little.

If Oxford women had not been so unattractive, things might have been different. Manners might have improved, while morals suffered a corresponding deterioration. As it is, the amount of actual sexual immorality is probably small.

<sup>1</sup> Since the above was written my attention has been drawn to a leading article in the *Isis*, published in 1930, in which it is casually stated: 'The fact remains that (apart from Buenos Aires and the higher circles of Chicago) there is a more constant high level of intoxication in Oxford than anywhere else in the world.'

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I doubt if any undergraduate, even with the best and warmest intentions, ever succeeds in obtaining more than a few moist caresses from the female students. It seems to me strange that he should hanker after even such minor delights, for the average woman undergraduate would seem to take a pride in making herself as unpleasing as possible. Her hair is untidy, her gown is askew, her fingers are frequently in need of a hard rub with pumice-stone, followed by a prolonged immersion in peroxide. However hard up he may be for an emotional outlet, it is difficult to see how an undergraduate can gain any thrill from the presence of these houris in his rooms, particularly as I understand that their favourite drink is cocoa. Compared with the 'co-ed' of an American university, the woman undergraduate of Oxford would receive nought for physical charm.

If it were otherwise, Oxford might not to-day offer so frequent a spectacle of brawls and disorders which, if they took place in the East End of London, would call for the intervention of the police. Again, I quote from the vivid pages of *Oxford Limited*.

'The Proctors' disregard of disorder in the City of Oxford would strike any visitor to the university as incredible. Some restaurants are turned into a bear garden, and any resident, traveller, or visitor who endeavours to eat a meal in them does so at his own peril. If he takes a lady with him, she is liable to insult from the tipsy louts who frequent them, and she is lucky if she does not receive a dish of food over her dress. During the free fights which take place periodically, other people's tables and food are scattered indiscriminately. Any night, food may be flying through the air; when the undergraduates are waiting for a course to be

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served, they habitually endeavour to draw attention to themselves by such means. Later in the evening, they may be seen staggering out with disordered stomachs which occasionally precipitate their contents before their owners reach their destination. When I was last in one of these restaurants the majority of the women present had enveloped themselves as far as possible in napkins and tablecloths in order to protect their dresses from damage.'

### V III

It is because I regard such orgies (which, as we must remind the reader once again, are something new in the history of the university) as typical of the universal contempt for discipline, which is spreading throughout the British Isles, that I give them this prominence.

Such a contempt for discipline will always be found in countries which have lost their faith. In the authoritarian countries the ancient worship of the Deity has been transferred to the new worship of the State. God forbid that we should ever experience a like transition. All the same, it is better to worship even at the man-made shrine of patriotism than to worship at no shrine at all.

However, at Oxford there are certain causes of disruption which are peculiar to the university, and are not to be found in the nation at large. It will be worth our while to examine these causes for a moment.

For some weeks last year *The Times* threw open its correspondence columns to a discussion of the distractions which, in many people's opinion, were defeating the purposes of

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the university and undermining the morale of the undergraduate. Much of the correspondence was worthless, because as soon as the word 'Oxford' is mentioned in any newspaper, the strangest people spring up from the strangest places and write the strangest things. Ancient deans flap out of their rookeries, caw three times, and disappear again. Professors whom one had thought long dead arise from clouds of dust, make several loud barks, and sink back into lethargy. 'Anxious Parents', that obscure class who occupy so much space in all newspaper controversies, write fluttering little letters about nothing at all, filled with petulant inquiries about matters which are entirely irrelevant.

*The Times* correspondence about Oxford was no exception to this rule. But although much of it was valueless, one did receive from it, at the end, a pretty strong conviction that the advent of the motor car and the cinema had been definitely detrimental to the undergraduate.

I can recall very few of my own generation who had motor cars. The vast majority of us came up to Oxford to work. There was, as Mr. Hore-Belisha has recently observed, in another connection, 'so much to do, and so little time in which to do it'. But now . . . study the advertising columns of the *Isis* and you will gain the impression that you are reading a motoring magazine. 'You are bound to need a car soon!' proclaims the advertisement on the back cover of the issue which lies before me. Apparently the advertisement is not exaggerating. At any rate, as the original correspondent in *The Times* was at pains to point out, in referring to the changes brought by the motor car:

'The so-called system of supervision exists largely in name only. The ease, for instance, with which a boy of

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19 or 20 is given leave to go to London, frequently without any adequate reason, is deplorable. To spend the evening at a night-club in Soho, or the afternoon at a sherry-party in the West End, may be a perfectly harmless amusement, but it is not for this that most boys are sent to the university.'

For weeks the correspondence dragged on in *The Times*, and eventually petered out. As far as one knows, nothing was done about it, and as far as one expects, nothing ever will be done. If it were, there would be shrill screams, from all classes and all parties, that an unwarrantable assault was being made upon 'liberty'.

### I X

This chapter has made gloomy reading. To many it will seem one-sided, superficial, prejudiced. The honest undergraduate will admit that it is true.

What is the use of pouring out millions, as Lord Nuffield has poured them out, upon a university which is rotten in spirit? The immense new college which is about to be built, as a result of Lord Nuffield's beneficence, will, of course, involve the clearance of some of the more flagrant architectural monstrosities which disfigure Oxford, to such an extent that Oxford is now one of the ugliest cities in the world.

But though Lord Nuffield's millions may cause to be destroyed some of the Oxford that is bad, may even cause to be erected some building which is worthy of the Oxford of the past, of what use will that building be, if it is spiritually empty?

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The purpose of the new college is to 'study the facts and problems of contemporary society'. It aims at bridging the gulf between the theoretical students of contemporary civilization and the men responsible for carrying it on, between the economist, the political theorist, the student of government and administration on the one hand, and on the other the business man, the politician, the civil servant, and the local government official, not to mention the ordinary everyday man and woman.

Grand ideals. To be grandly launched. With great halls, and spacious gardens, and quantities of Fellows and Directors, who will be in receipt of salaries which would make the average European professor water at the mouth. But there is one thing which is more important than any building, more desirable than the richest hall or the most spacious garden, and that is the right spirit in the young generation who will one day throng these places.

And for that spirit, in modern Oxford, you will search in vain.



## CHAPTER X

### PAGLIACCI

#### I

It is time, once again, that we had a little light relief.

It is time, in fact, that we had a really good laugh.

Up till now, our English journey has been extremely depressing. It is giving us the creeps. We are in the mood when we would like to forget it all . . . to draw our chairs up to the fire, put our feet on the mantelpiece, order a whisky and soda. And of course, a copy of *Punch*.

For *Punch* is the nation's jester. And we are sorely in need of him just now.

Here we are, then. The fire is burning brightly. The drink is a good one. *Punch* is on our lap. As we open it, we can reflect that after all we are not really wasting our time. It may not be true that one can learn as much from a nation's jesters as from its prophets or its princes, but at least one can learn something.

For a nation's jester has, or should have, his finger on the national pulse. In the rattle of his bells one should hear, however distantly, the echo of other bells . . . the bells that rouse men from their sleep, that call them to worship, that ring them to war. And on the distorted mirror which he holds up for the diversion of the crowd, the crowd may sometimes see a truer picture of its own face than on a smoother, soberer surface.

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There was a time when *Punch* fulfilled this function to perfection. A bound copy of every volume, starting with Number One, has been a feature of my own family's library ever since I can remember. And a great deal of English history it has taught me. It is only in the pages of *Punch*, for example, that you will realize the full force of the unpopularity of Queen Victoria at one stage of her reign. Now that Queen Victoria has been canonized by Hollywood, and sentimentalized out of all knowledge by British historians, it would seem blasphemy to say a word against her. So we will not say it. We will merely observe that any magazine which ventured to reprint some of *Punch*'s contemporary Victorian cartoons would be accused of the grossest bad taste.

So it was all through the Victorian age. *Punch*'s humour rang true. The drawing-rooms of Du Maurier were as authentic as the pubs of Phil May, who succeeded him. The cartoons of Sir Charles Tenniel were not merely an arrangement of lay figures, they were searchlights on history. The drawing which he entitled 'Dropping the Pilot', which showed the young Kaiser leaning over the side of the ship, staring at the departing figure of Bismarck, had a quality of genius to which he did not always attain. But there can be no doubt about the consistently high level of his cartoons, and of those of his successor, Linley Sambourne.

Then came the war. And something happened to *Punch*. Or rather *nothing* happened to *Punch*. The jester kept his same old suit, held tighter to his same old quill, and rattled the same old bells, which sounded more and more thin, and out of tune. The majority of the British public, apparently, did not notice the incongruity. After all, *Punch* was an

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'institution'. One could not imagine life without it. Whenever one heard anything funny, one said, automatically: 'That's good enough for *Punch*.' And so, it went on and on, and still on.

I do not imagine that anything I say will have the least effect upon its circulation. The best I can hope is that I may cause some of its readers, as they laugh, to ask themselves what they are laughing at, and if they should be laughing at all.

### II

It was after the war, when I first began to read *Punch* seriously (if you know what I mean) instead of turning over the pages to look at the pictures, that I began to wonder why it was that some things that struck me as tragic were regarded, by *Punch*, as fit subjects for humour.

Consider that phrase, the 'temporary gentleman', which, to England's disgrace, was used as an expression of contempt for those gallant men whose bravery or ability had caused them to rise from the ranks to the officer classes. I do not know if *Punch* invented it, but I do know that it made the freest possible use of this 'joke'. In my eccentric opinion it thereby forfeited every claim to be considered as a paper which gentlemen, temporary or permanent, could regard with respect.

That joke of the 'temporary gentleman' was the ugliest and cruellest joke which has ever been made in any language. In two words it expresses depths of callousness and vulgarity before which, I should have thought, the decent man would

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stand aghast. To sneer at a man who had stormed the heights of Gallipoli because he slipped up on the floor of the Savoy, to point a finger of scorn at a man whose bravery had saved the lives of his 'betterers' merely because he wore a white tie with a dinner jacket, to giggle behind his back because he was not as efficient with a fork as with a bayonet . . . such conduct, I repeat, is cruel and contemptible. *Punch* was in the vanguard of these elegant scoffers. And since *Punch* was to be found in every officers' mess in England, the wretched 'temporary gentleman' whose sole crime was that he had been a finer soldier than the rest, was subjected to perpetual humiliation.

I have spoken to some of these men who told me that they had been tempted to resign their commissions out of disgust at the mentality which inspired that unpardonable phrase.

### III

It might have been hoped that twenty years of precarious peace, and the prospect of a world ringing ever more recklessly down swifter grooves of change, would have woken *Punch* up. It might have been expected that the jester would have bestirred himself, tuned up his bells, and found something better to laugh at than the uncouthness of domestic servants, the quaintness of the poor, and the *gaffes* of the *nouveaux riches*.

It might have been thought, in fact, that *Punch* would have cast off its petty snobbery, and realized that there are quite a number of things in the world which are just as

funny as, let us say, the man who wears an old school tie to which he is not entitled.

*Punch*, however, did not wake up. It remained as fast asleep as the great middle-class public which it so faithfully represents. And it is the fact that it *does* represent them which is so disturbing to any honest student of contemporary England.

Picking up the first number of the year 1937, and opening it at random I find a picture called 'The Servants' Ball'. It shows a number of ladies and gentlemen, dancing with their servants. Without exception each of the ladies and gentlemen is provided with a fiercely Norman profile, and each of the domestics is provided with an arrogantly turned-up nose.

The centre of the stage is occupied by His Lordship, who is dancing with Emily, the housemaid. Emily is holding him at arm's length, for which I do not blame her. In the background, the butler stands with Her Ladyship, watching. Underneath is the 'joke'.

*Butler: I fear, my lady, that Hemily is not a good mixer.*

It is doubtless foolish to read too much into a trivial little joke in a comic paper. Yet I cannot refrain from observing that I find this 'joke' not only unfunny but repulsive. Perhaps this is due to an inability to see in such an institution as a servants' ball anything that is other than embarrassing. It may have been different in the Edwardian age, when servants and masters still thought themselves to be members, not only of a different class but of a different race. To-day it only serves, in a very unpleasant way, to draw attention to a barrier which, in 1937, is not a little incongruous. If Emily, the housemaid, were to be other than distant with His Lordship, she would very soon be given to understand

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that she was stepping out of her place, and would probably be informed on the following day that her services were no longer required.

This note of *bourgeois* snobbishness runs through the whole paper. The members of the proletariat are always represented as short, mean, ugly, clumsy, stupid and ridiculous. The members of the aristocracy are always represented as tall, noble, and rather splendid . . . ‘though of course, old chap, we can’t be expected to have brains, what?’

Moreover, it is assumed that the lower classes are still awed by the aforesaid aristocracy, that they still gape up at them with a mixture of fear and respect. Is *Punch* . . . by which I mean the English middle classes . . . completely unaware of the changes which are shaking society? When I open its pages in the year 1937, and find a housemaid addressing a plumber, who is wearing a bowler hat, and saying to him, ‘I ’ope you’re not thinking of mending ’er Ladyship’s taps with your ’at on, Mr. Brown?’ . . . I wonder, quite honestly, in what circles the artist moves and has his being. All humour that *is* humour must be based, however remotely, on truth. This joke bears no sort of relation to truth. It is inconceivable that any housemaid in modern England could make such a remark, and it is inconceivable that any plumber, on hearing it, would regard her, as he regards her in the drawing, with such respectful awe. The average plumber (who has to be an exceedingly intelligent man) would either think that the woman had gone mad or would burst into rude and derisive laughter.

We turn on the pages. If it were not for the date at the top we might imagine that we were back in the days of Du Maurier, though there is little of Du Maurier’s skill to give

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charm to this fustian. We find the old joke about the mean Scotsman who will not give the taximan a tip. We are asked to smile at a picture of a man wearing a loud tie . . . this picture, by the way, is accompanied by a caption which, to me, is so utterly pointless, that I will print it in the hope that either the editor or some loyal reader may be able to tell me where its carefully hidden humour resides. Here it is . . .

*Where on earth did you get that tie, Johnson?  
From my Auntie Flo, sir.*

Just like that. Nothing more. I have read these lines forwards, backwards and upside down, and in none of these positions do they occasion even the faintest spontaneous contraction of the diaphragm. Johnson got his tie from Auntie Flo. Auntie Flo gave Johnson his tie. It is a loud tie. From Auntie Flo, Johnson received a loud tie. The mind reels at the effort to extract humour from this echo of the Stone Ages.

But at least it is an inoffensive joke. I wish I could say as much of half the other jokes with which this paper is filled. For if they have a point at all, it resides in the effectiveness with which they sneer at the disabilities of the poor, from the safe vantage point of £2000 a year.

## I V

*Punch*, however, like the English middle classes, has its serious side. Although all may be well with England (except when there is a general strike or an abdication or some other

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piece of un-Englishness) *Punch* is well aware that Europe is in a troubled state, and that an intelligent interest must be shown in our comparatively savage neighbours.

But alas . . . somehow the cartoonists seem to have lost their cunning. Tenniel must be sleeping uneasily in his grave when he sees the number of opportunities they are missing. For as soon as the modern *Punch* cartoonist has drawn a plump Britannia, stuck her on a rock with a lot of clouds at her back, placed a trident in her hand and made her exclaim 'Watchman, what of the night?' his comments upon the European situation seem to be exhausted. Of course, Britannia is not always left stuck on top of her rock. The cartoonists have several other positions into which, with an effort, they can put her. They can, for instance, make her sit *down* upon the rock, from which vantage point she usually sternly regards either Hitler, Mussolini, or Stalin. To these persons she often says something very sharp and to the point, like . . . 'I should believe more in your peaceful pretensions gentlemen, if you would stop pointing that gun in my face.' Very original and penetrating, you will agree. We hope it makes the dictators sit up.

Sometimes Britannia steps off the stage to reappear dressed up as the League of Nations, or Peace. You can always tell which is which. If it is the League she has a hat on her head bearing the word 'Geneva'. If it is Peace she has a very fat dove on her left shoulder. The dove is chewing a piece of vegetation which, at first sight, appears to be parsley but proves, on closer inspection, to be a sprig of olive. Whenever she is dressed up in these clothes, the clouds over her head are very dark indeed, and Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin are given particularly evil expressions,

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and, if possible, double chins. But she is not deterred, and in spite of the menacing situation, she always manages to say something inspired, such as: 'I should be happier, gentlemen, if you would stop quarrelling, and let *me* say a few words for a minute.' It must be very tiring indeed for the *Punch* cartoonists to have to produce such masterpieces, week after week.

Well, there we are. If *Punch* should ever do me the honour of caricaturing me, I am sure that I too shall have an evil expression and a double chin. In the hope that I may soften the pen of the caricaturist I hasten to add that nobody is more fully aware than I am that the sentiments expressed in this chapter are extreme. There are still delightful things to be found in *Punch*. The drawings of Belcher and Fougasse and Bateman, the wit of A.P.H. and many others. But I shall never forgive *Punch* for its 'joke' about the temporary gentleman, which is still, in various forms and disguises, its most popular theme of humour. And since this joke is typical of the mentality of the sleepy, snobbish middle class of England, I am afraid that we must admit that the light relief, for which we hoped in this chapter, is still a long way off.

Perhaps we shall find it in Society itself? For *Punch*, which is on Society's side, is unlikely to see the really funny aspects of it. Perhaps we, who are on nobody's side, may be more fortunate.

At any rate, there will be no harm in trying.



## CHAPTER XI

### SOCIETY PAGEANT

#### I

If you wish to gauge the extent of the revolution which, within living memory, has swept away all the landmarks of what was once known as 'society', you have only to compare the pages of any Victorian novel with the advertisement section of any modern magazine.

In the former you will find constant sneering references to persons who had something to do with 'trade'. In the latter you will find the photographs of practically every living peeress advertising a popular beautifier.

Personally, I think the change is all to the good. Any man of spirit who was forced to listen to those Victorian sneers must have been tempted to retort, somewhat hotly, that it was better to live on one's own honest efforts than on the proceeds of the burglaries of one's ancestors . . . for a considerable proportion of the most ancient British fortunes were founded on plain theft.

Besides, the spectacle of a long procession of plain women, with coronets on their heads, blandly informing us that they owe their dazzling complexions to X's beautifier is, to me, a never-failing delight. In a number of cases it would pay the advertisers to get them to say that they never *did* use X's beautifier. Which, of course, they never do. I often wonder what their maids must think, when they compare

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their mistresses' statements in the magazine with the array of expensive creams, astringent lotions, powders and maquilage which they have to tidy up every night.

Peeresses, and daughters of peeresses, are so cheap nowadays that they are beginning to lose their advertising value. About ten years ago a more or less unspotted countess would be worth about a thousand pounds, if she could be persuaded to go the whole hog, i.e. to be photographed with the family jewels (or, at least a borrowed collection that looked like family jewels) and to proclaim, as blatantly as possible, that X's beautifier was essential before (and after) being presented at Court, riding with the Quorn, attending the opening of Parliament, and doing all the other unenviable things which, it is assumed, are the chief pleasures of countesses.

To-day she would be lucky if she got two hundred guineas. She would have to wear a very large tiara indeed, and say that she did everything with the goods except eat them.

### II

Although the eagerness of a lot of silly women to tell a lot of silly lies to a lot of silly people is, admittedly, a subject upon which it might not seem elevating for us to dwell too long, it is nevertheless important to the student of national psychology. For this reason.

About ten years ago it was still the fashion for these women to tell one that they gave all the money which they received from the advertisers to their favourite charity.

To-day, they seldom make any pretence that the money is going to anybody but themselves. In some cases, they

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deserve our respect. A woman of very exceptional position, one of the few who was still in a position to charge thousands of pounds for her name, told me that she hated the whole thing but that she saw no other way of paying for the education of her sons.

The majority of the others are not entitled to so much sympathy. 'Everybody does it, so why shouldn't I? Besides, I want a mink coat.' That seems to be the prevailing pose.

The modern word for this pose is 'hard-boiled', and since it is a new pose, and looks as though it might well become a permanent one, we will examine it in greater detail.

### I I I

It is really an American importation. You must not wear your heart on your sleeve, though you are at liberty to wear your liver. You must not express any obvious emotions in public. For instance, if you have a baby (to which you are just as devoted as any Victorian mother) you must refer to it as a hideous little brat. You still talk, quite openly, about Ann who is having an 'affaire' with Anthony, but instead of saying, as the Bright Young People used to say, that it was all too marvellous, you must say that it's all very dreary.

Nothing matters very much. The whole mood has been toned down. A wash of grey has been painted over the picture. The other day I received a letter from a young woman of considerable culture and taste who has just visited the Giotto Chapel at Padua. 'I thought it was pretty good,' she said. That represents the highest transports which

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as if a Salvation Army preacher were to rise up in the middle of the floor of the Café de Paris and deliver a harangue against the lyrics of Mr. Douglas Byng or Mr. Dwight Fiske.

Why?

Not because the little lady had ceased to dance. She is dancing more madly than ever. Nor because there was anything wrong with Mr. Coward's lyric, in 1928 or in 1938. It expresses, with economy and punch, a sincere moral emotion.

No . . . the only reason that this lyric appears, to-day, to be so 'shymaking', (to use a phrase which dates from a later, but even more defunct period), is because we can't be bothered. We have been through too much. We are too tired. 'The whole thing's going to crash, anyway . . . so what's the use?'

As a result of this attitude, life has become far more casual. For my own interest, if not for yours, I have jotted down a few of the changes which have come over us.

We smoke with our meals, in the American fashion. And we do not smoke Turkish cigarettes, we smoke stinkers, or American Chesterfield or Camels, which are placed in little jade bowls in front of us. It would seem very odd not to see those little jade bowls, and it would also seem very odd, in a modern dining-room, to ask one's hostess permission to smoke. Almost as strange, as olde worlde, as standing up in a tube to offer a woman a seat.

We come in to lunch as if we are of the female sex, with or without our hats, and we can leave when we want. It is becoming more and more fashionable for the hostess to be later than the guests. This is very pleasant for the hostess, but it is infuriating for the guests. 'Her ladyship is not

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down yet', whispers the butler. And then he precipitates you into a large, ill-lit room, where three women in black are standing by the mantelpiece, drinking sherry.

We have lost much of our insularity. We are more European. Our favourite country, of course, is Austria. This is largely due to the charm and energy of that brilliant man Baron Franckenstein, the Austrian Minister. He has such an understanding of the English character, such a flair for giving parties, that he has put Austria on the map almost as successfully as the powers at Versailles took it off.<sup>1</sup> Most of us speak a little German, with a Viennese accent. We like saying simple adjectives like 'gemutlich', and it prides us, when we say 'ja', to give it the wienerisch twist . . . a mixture between 'jaw' and 'je'.

We are not so interested in 'decoration' as we used to be, ten years ago. Before the crash there was a number of women, more or less in 'society', who made fortunes by selling furniture at ridiculous prices and putting it in ridiculous places. If you were a smart, energetic woman, and if you had lots of rich friends, and an elementary sense of colour and design, you could 'clean up' quite quickly. You 'cleaned up' not only metaphorically but literally, because the recognized formula for decoration was to strip all the walls of their mouldings, whether they were good or bad, to plunge every piece of furniture within reach into a bath of pickling acid, to instal one or two enormous sofas in white leather, to arrange a few old mirrors which made you think you had leprosy when you looked into them, and then to send in the bill.

People are not led so easily by the nose to-day. The

<sup>1</sup> And as Hitler, as this book goes to press, appears to be taking it off once more.

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amateur decorators are in a bad way. They have to work for their money.

It is not an inspiring picture, is it? It is not shocking, it is merely rather dull. It has none of that vivid colour to which we were accustomed in the spangled days of the Bright Young People. It is pathetic to recall those people to-day. A number of them are prematurely dead. Most of the survivors are prematurely aged. A few have pulled themselves together and made good. They now lead lives of fierce respectability in the Midlands, as though they were trying to make up for lost time. Let us look back on them for a moment, over the immense distance of ten years. It will show us how far we have left them behind. You will observe that I do not say 'progressed'.

### v

Their glitter has faded, their laughter echoes very thin, and only one quality stands out, with startling vividness, their vulgarity. It is astonishing that nobody, in those days, appeared to notice this quality. The Bright Young People were condemned because they were, in the eyes of the British public, extravagant and perverse. But nobody condemned them for the most obvious reason of all . . . that they were exceedingly 'common'.

There is existent, in the magazines of this remote period, a photograph showing a number of the Bright Young People standing at Hyde Park Corner, in the small hours of the morning, with a group of workmen who were repairing the road. The Bright Young People had just

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come from a fancy dress party, and very exquisite and gay they looked. The gas flares lit up their silver wigs and their satin dresses. It also lit up the grimy overalls, the pale faces of the workmen, who stared at these exotic visions as though they had just emerged from Fairyland. The Bright Young People thought it was 'terribly amusing' to talk to these rough men, and since they adored publicity, they made sure that there was a permanent record of their amusement. The picture obtained even more publicity than they had hoped. The Bright Young People described it, in that dead language of the twenties, as 'too divine'. The British public at large looked very closely at it, and said it was 'shameful'. But nobody, not even the harassed parents of those concerned, objected to it because of its appalling vulgarity.

Vulgarity can cause revolutions. As soon as gentlemen cease to behave like gentlemen there is no reason for the existence of gentlemen. And when there is no reason for a creature's existence, in Nature or in Society, that creature is doomed. The aristocrats of France, in 1788, who rattled so arrogantly through the cobbled streets of their villages, were not only giving an exhibition of cruelty and of oppression. They were giving an exhibition of a far more dangerous vice . . . vulgarity.

## VI

There is not so much of that sort of vulgarity about to-day, for to be really vulgar you have to be excited about something. The vulgar woman in the charabanc is the one

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who is enjoying herself and, in consequence, throws banana skins at her neighbour and makes rude sounds at the passers-by. The genteel woman, in the same conveyance, is the one who removes the banana skin from her lap with pained surprise, and draws in her breath with a refined hiss.

Society having emerged from its charabanc seems now to be sitting down by the side of the road, longing for something to do. To those of us who know how much there is to do, and how, in certain Continental countries, the upper classes have taken off their coats, mingled with the workers and got down to the job of doing it, there is something almost frightening in the thought that so large a section of English 'society' should think that their responsibilities begin and end with a gala night at a cinema, or a pageant 'in aid of something or other' at a Mayfair hotel.

Needless to say there are exceptions. There are women who work really hard in the East End. There are young men who run boys' clubs when they would very much rather be dancing. There are still plenty of 'paternal' squires, scattered over England, who realize that they have a duty to their tenants as well as to themselves. And of course, there is always Lord Nuffield. But these are, I repeat, exceptions. The majority of English society people think that the most which can be expected of them, in these days of social unrest, is that they should give a party, charge rather more for the champagne than usual, and hand over the surplus (if any) to some cause whose name they cannot even remember.

To my mind there is something revolting about the following paragraph which is typical of a number which

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I have collected concerning the activities of these people.  
‘‘*I’m ordering a heavenly dress from S—, simply plastered with paillettes,*’’ she told me, when I asked her what role she was going to adopt in the Pageant. ‘‘*Of course it’s terribly expensive . . . but then it is such a good cause, don’t you think?*’’

There would have been no reason to single it out for special notice (for every morning and evening newspaper considers it vital to print a page of this nonsense in every issue) were it not for the fact that the sentence in italics sums up, with merciless accuracy, the attitude of so many people towards the problems of the country.

‘There is a great deal of “malnutrition” among the children of Wales? Oh dear, oh dear, how terrible, we must give a party for them at once. Well, not exactly *for* them . . . I mean . . . it would be terribly embarrassing to have a lot of gawky children trooping into the hall at Claridges . . . I mean . . . don’t you think? No, we must give a party for *ourselves*, don’t you think? . . . I mean . . . and charge everybody three guineas . . . of course if we’re going to act and work ourselves to the bone, I mean, they won’t expect *us* to buy tickets . . . but there are hundreds of dreary people who will, don’t you think?’

If you have never taken part in one of these pageants it might amuse you to do so now.

It starts with a cocktail party at the house of a woman whom we will call Mrs. Starch. Mrs. S. never appears in a gossip paragraph without the prefix ‘indefatigable’. She has gone through her list of professional pageanteers. They are mostly young married women, of reasonably ancient family, who have walked down miles and miles of staircases, at Claridges, and the Dorchester and the Mayfair

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and such places, wearing a little less than usual in the faint hope that the miners' children will soon be wearing a little more than usual. They have also stood very still against curtains, for a period which seems centuries (to the audience) disguised as 'Lady Hamilton', 'A Bacchante' (after Botticelli), 'Dawn' (diamond clips kindly lent by Messrs. Cartier), and 'Jeune Fille' (with apologies to Marie Laurencin).

There is something curiously old-fashioned about the roles usually adopted by these young women. Nobody, as far as I am aware, has yet interpreted any of the works of Dali, whose painting of a lady sitting in a bath with a mutton chop on her head was considered such a tender piece of poetry at a recent Surrealist exhibition.

Well, here they all are, at six o'clock, in Ella Starch's music-room, with the clipped sheepskin rugs and the alabaster lighting and the pickled piano and the even more pickled footman. Some with hats, some without, some with real pearls, some with false, most of them in black. Their conversation (as always, when women are gathered together) is addressed to the interior of their hand-bags, because they haven't had time to do up their faces all day.

'It's madness to have Gladys as Venus. She's a professional and she makes everybody else look like death.'

'Why couldn't Noel write us a sort of anthem?'

'My dear, she won't sing a *note* for less than two hundred guineas, if it's a really good cause.'

'Don't give him a *chance* to wear any feathers this time, then.'

And so on, and so on. After a number of these reunions, the public are informed, through the press, of the

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delights that await them. Rehearsals begin. Overworked professionals are cajoled to act as producers and spend hours of time which they can ill afford trying to teach the pageanteers how to walk downstairs without falling over. At each rehearsal half of the pageanteers are absent . . . they are detained at a party, they thought it was another day, they are ill, they are sure they are going to have a baby, they know their part backwards, there is a fog in Westminster. . . . But eventually the day arrives. And after an expenditure, by themselves and by the public, of something like £10,000, at least half of this sum will eventually find its way to the distressed areas.

We are not an ungenerous people. Nor are we a callous people. As one who in the past has lent his name to charitable appeals, I can vouch for the vast reserves of kindness which lie deep in the heart of the nation.

But though we are not ungenerous, we are, to a deplorable degree, unimaginative. We do not even begin to see the vulgarity of these highly advertised society pageants, which provide the illustrated weeklies with so large a proportion of their copy.

It is not only that Lady X looks exceedingly foolish, stalking across a ballroom in the small hours of the morning, wearing little more than a self-conscious simper, in the fond illusion that she is interpreting Cleopatra. It is not only that her part would be played, with far more grace and dignity, by any mannequin earning three guineas a week. The vulgarity does not consist in the act itself, though that, heaven knows, is sufficiently humourless and ostentatious. It is the thought, or rather the lack of thought . . . behind the act, that is so deplorable.

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Lady X, before she dazzles us, for this brief moment, on the slippery ballroom floor, has been consuming cocktails for weeks, in order to decide the precise degree of dazzlingment to which we are to be entitled. She has also consumed a great deal of petrol, motoring to the dressmakers, to the hairdressers, to the beauty parlours, to the organizers. She has put through a quantity of telephone calls, driven her secretary crazy, sworn at her masseuse. She has written, or will eventually write, a large cheque in payment for her dress. And she has consumed, or will eventually consume, a substantial ration of champagne in order to enable her to recover from her ordeal.

Wouldn't it have been better if Lady X had stayed at home, and sent all that money to the people who really needed it?

Wouldn't it be better, in fact, if she and her sisters woke up, and realized that you can't stop the eruption of a volcano by dancing on its edge?

## CHAPTER XII

### FINE FEATHERS

#### I

At about noon on the morning of the Ascot Gold Cup last year, the proprietor of a large second-hand tailor's shop in London looked up from his ledger with an expression of great satisfaction, and said:

'One hundred and eighty-seven!'

'One hundred and eighty-seven what?' asked his partner. He spoke a little snappily, for he would have liked to have gone to the races too.

'One hundred and eighty-seven morning-coats, hired for the day by the nobility and gentry of England!'

'That's thirty more than last year.'

'Thirty-two,' corrected the proprietor. 'If it goes on like this we shall soon be dressing the whole of the Royal Enclosure. Boy . . . it's a social revolution.'

He was not exaggerating. For though these figures are probably larger than those of any other firm, there are at least a dozen similar establishments, scattered over London. And they were all besieged, last Gold Cup day, for morning-coats.

This sudden excursion into the realm of tailoring is not as irrelevant as it sounds. You can learn a great deal from the way in which the people of a country dress. The lederhosen of the Hitler Jugend are as significant as the

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Schiaparelli uniforms of the Moscow maidens. And in England, the country which has set the standard of masculine elegance for over a hundred years, we ought to be able to draw some very interesting deductions by a visit to our tailors, if we keep our eyes and our ears open.

It was with this object, therefore, that I wandered down Bond Street one golden October morning. The flower-shops were full of gigantic chrysanthemums, rust-coloured, tawny, and yellow. The provision-stores displayed quantities of fascinating indigestibilities in their windows . . . *truffes de Périgord*, scarlet cocks' combs bottled in white wine, avocado pears the size of small footballs, caviare in buckets. The jewellers were on fire with all the latest clips, bracelets and brooches. Never was there a morning when it was so difficult to resist buying a new cigarette case. They sparkled on their velvet trays in white gold and yellow gold and platinum, faintly effeminate, altogether desirable. As a result of a great deal of nose-pressing against the plate-glass I arrived at my tailor's when most of his clients were at lunch, and so I had him to myself.

'How many morning-coats did you make last Ascot,' I asked him, 'for the nobility and gentry of England?'

He blew down an antique tube, from which dust came in clouds, sneezed, and made the inquiry.

'Five,' he said, hanging up the tube. 'And they weren't for the nobility and gentry of England, either.' He shook his head. 'No, sir. Three were for Americans, and two were for Argentines.'

'How many would you have made in the old days?'

'At least forty.'

'Trade bad?'

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'Bad?' He raised his eyebrows. '*Bad?* It's immense. We're turning people away. But the morning-coat is dead.'

'Why?'

'The Duke of Windsor. He killed it.' He shook his head again. 'He killed it. Stone dead.'

He spoke as though the morning-coat were some large and amiable animal which had been callously slaughtered by the Duke of Windsor.

'It was at a luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel, about ten years ago,' he went on. 'All the City big-wigs were there, in their morning-coats. It was a very hot day, and the Duke of Windsor arrived in a lounge-suit. Very sensible of him, of course, but still . . . after that, things were never the same.'

He sighed, and stroked a roll of beautiful Harris tweed. 'If we go on like this,' he said, 'the only time you'll ever see a morning-coat will be stuffed, in a glass case, next to a suit of armour.'

### II

It all fits in very well with the various signs of increasing casualness which we noted in our recent examination of modern English society.

For instance, I learned from my tailor that seventy-five per cent of the best modern dinner-jackets are double-breasted. This may sound a news-item of almost unbearable triviality to a large number of the population, but news is trivial only if you choose to make it so. For the double-breasted dinner-jacket is yet another of the multitudinous signs that in these days we are too tired to bother. You can

wear a soft shirt, with collar attached, when you have on a double-breasted dinner jacket. You don't have to indulge, any longer, in that exhausting struggle with your dress-studs. That is reserved for the occasions when you have to wear tails . . . occasions which are slowly but surely diminishing.

Another thing which I learn from my tailor is that the credit system is rapidly dying. I am not so determined to deprecate my countrymen's morality as to suggest that this is a sinister sign of national decadence. It is, however, a very definite sign that the nobility and gentry are no longer regarded as of such vital importance as they used to be . . . at least by the tradespeople. There was a time when a noble earl was given an infinite amount of rope. He was often allowed to die and to be respectably buried before anything was done about his bill. To-day things are very different. All the tradespeople have black-lists, and a surprising number of members of the Upper House appear in them.

This is really a much greater revolution than most foreigners would imagine. Even in my day, at Oxford, one never dreamt of paying one's tailor's bill while one was still at the university. It was not till nearly three years afterwards that I settled my own account. Life had taught me that credit does not pay. However when I asked my first London tailor if he allowed ten per cent off for cash, he looked very pained indeed. 'I believe there is some—er—arrangement to that effect, sir,' he observed, as he drew off my trousers.

'In that case, would you send me the bill at once?'

'The bill?' he paused, regarding the trousers which hung

## FINE FEATHERS

over his arm as though they were covered with a faint but unmistakable slime. ‘The bill?’ he repeated. Then, with a great effort, he pulled himself together, murmured something about ‘seeing to it’, and staggered out of the room, leaving me to put on the rest of my clothes myself.

It was quite evident that he had never mentioned the word ‘bill’ before, at any rate in the presence of gentlemen. It was not a word which gentlemen were accustomed to hear.

But they are accustomed to hear it, plainly enough, to-day. It is true that if you were to walk into a first-class tailor’s this morning you might not at first notice any difference from the pre-war era. There are still the same faded notices announcing the dates of levees, courts, and balls. There are still the same colour-prints of gentlemen of exquisite elegance emerging on the steps of White’s Club, bent on giving Piccadilly a treat. There are still, on odd shelves, the same boxes discreetly addressed to His Grace the Duke of This and His Royal Highness the Maharajah of That. (I have yet to see anybody leave parcels about addressed to *me*.) But although these things remain as they have always been, for generations, you will also observe, tucked away in dark corners, little notices to the effect that gentlemen who are beginning new accounts are respectfully requested either to furnish satisfactory references or to provide a deposit of £5.

A deposit of £5! Members of the old guard, reading that notice for the first time, must have experienced feelings not unlike those of the French aristocracy, reading the first proclamations of Camille Desmoulins in the colonnades of the Palais Royal. They must have said: ‘This is the beginning of the end.’ And maybe they were right.

## NEWS OF ENGLAND

III

Yet another revolution awaits us. And this time, I am thankful to say, we can chronicle a renaissance instead of mourning a decline.

As everybody knows, the men of the world have always looked to London to learn what they should wear. But the women of the world have always looked to Paris.

It may be news to the great majority of my countrymen that London is rapidly rivalling Paris as a centre of feminine fashion. And as far as I know, they may not care very much about it. The English press certainly doesn't. Although the English designers are creating the styles and setting the paces, the newspapers still splash the word 'Paris' all over their women's pages. It is always 'What Paris will wear this summer', 'Paris decrees black', 'Paris says spots'. And so on.

It is very hard to understand. After all, this business of dressing women is one which occupies a great deal of the attention of the world. Men go down into mines, dive under the sea, scale mountains, sweat blood . . . all in the service of my lady's dress. It is to be presumed that more than one war has, directly or indirectly, been fought over this same flimsy pretext. (A piece of chiffon is as good a reason as any other for blowing out the brains of a decent young man.) And so, it seems to me to be important. And as it is going to be a great deal more important, it may be worth while to study the personality of the young man who has given the English trade such an extraordinary boost and the French trade such an unpleasant shock.

About fifteen years ago a boy with eyes of Cambridge

## FINE FEATHERS

blue bumped into me at a party and asked me if I knew any nice women.

'What do you mean by nice?'

'Rich,' he said. Just like that.

I observed him with disapproval. I naturally assumed that he wished to become a gigolo. Times were so bad that this was a profession which, it was rumoured, was shortly to be officially recognized by the universities.

'Why do you want to know rich women?'

'I want to design dresses for them.'

'Oh, I see.' I mentally apologized. '*Can* you design dresses?'

'Come and see.'

I followed him, with reluctance, into a bedroom filled with people's hats and coats. He delved under a chair and produced a portfolio. I sighed. It was going to be depressing. Excited scrawls in pink crayon on heavy grey paper. Smudgy washes of water colour, picked out in gold. That was what it was going to be. Bits of Bakst, and still more bits of Bakst. All impossible, from a practical point of view.

And one would have to smile and say 'Oh yes . . . I like that touch of green . . . yes . . . that's very amusing . . . yes, I see . . . what, more? *Haven't* you been busy!'

But it wasn't like that. For to my surprise, the young man could draw. And he had a charming sense of colour, and a great fertility of invention. Also, most important of all, the dullest dressmaker could have seen, to the last button, how the design was to be transformed into a reality.

'They're very good,' I said.

'Yes,' he replied, 'they are.'

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'All the same, I only know one rich woman.'

'I'd better take her telephone number now, in case you forget.'

'She's unusually odious.'

He made no comment, but waited politely, crayon in hand, for the telephone number.

This was a young man after my own heart. If anything was certain, in the swirling 'twenties, it was that he would get on.

He did get on.

He got a job at £3 a week.

That job led to another . . . and another.

He started on his own. He obtained no outside capital. He co-operated with no other designer. Every detail of every dress he has ever sold has been traced by his own pencil. And to-day, apart from such minor tokens of success as paying a personal income tax of £20,000 a year, he dresses everybody from the Queen of England downwards, and he employs five hundred people on his Mayfair premises alone. Since this is a very much larger business than any similar house in Paris, and since it has encouraged other English houses to make assaults on the American market, with considerable success, it is not surprising that the French are sitting up and taking notice.

His name, by the way, is Norman Hartnell.

## I V

Let us pay a visit to one of his parades in Bruton Street. It is worth doing, if only for the reason that we could not

## FINE FEATHERS

possibly have done it at any previous time in London's history. We are doing something completely *new*.

The walls are the colour of clay, heavily mirrored. Great chandeliers twinkle in the sad sunlight of Mayfair. The atmosphere has a delicate reek of Turkish cigarette smoke and many perfumes.

Round the walls, on gold chairs, sit the women who have come to buy. About two hundred of them. Rows of silk legs, rows of scarlet mouths, rows of black hats, stuck on sideways. They do not often speak.

They look very earnest. And some have every need to look earnest, for nothing that they could do to their figures could possibly make them desirable.

Why do such women come to dress-shows at all? Why do they not go about in nice big black shawls? Why do they try to compete? These are the questions I always ask at dress-shows. And if they sound cruel, they are only prompted by the conviction that such women must suffer tortures by this incessant struggle with the elementary forces of nature.

So why? What are their illusions? What, for example, can be passing through the mind of that middle-aged woman opposite? She is what is known as 'out' size. A very long way out, too. She has short legs, no neck, and a mouth like a small, enraged limpet. Her sit-upon is of the sort which defies camouflage. Yet she is making all sorts of frenzied notes about the dress which is passing by . . . a green dress that is worn by a girl like a lily. It clings to the slim figure of the mannequin as leaves cling to a flower. On the lady with the sit-upon it would look like the wrapping round a bulky parcel. Yet she continues to make notes.

## NEWS OF ENGLAND

Why?

However, such questions are distracting us from the dresses.

Let us look at them. They are the sort of dresses that might inspire such purple passages that we had better assume that we have looked, before it is too late. We had better leave the parade and pay a visit to the workrooms. For it is there that we shall find the people who really matter.

### v

Not only do we find the people who really matter. We find a skill, a devotion to detail, that had passed, we thought, from this mechanical world.

Consider the preparation of the stuff for one of those dresses we saw downstairs. (Its decoration had obviously been inspired from some of the earlier mouldings of the Adam brothers.)

Here on a sheet of silk are being traced the ghosts of silver flowers. A sequin falls, light fingers guide it, there is the flash of a needle, and it rests in place, like a tiny dewdrop. The sequins continue to fall, and are captured by threads as delicate as cobwebs. And as you watch, the petals slowly grow, and shine before you, till at the end of half an hour there is the outline of a silver rose . . . a rose of the frost, with the last flush of summer glowing in the silk beneath.

'This dress has 80,000 paillettes,' says the woman by my side.

A paillette, I learn, is a sequin whose edges curve inwards.

## FINE FEATHERS

'And each paillette needs two stitches to keep it in place,' she adds.

In other words, a girl has to stitch 160,000 times in order to create those few flowers, which may only glitter for a few moments down some brilliant staircase.

This is the sort of fact which, in Labour journals, is used as very telling propaganda against the rich. A picture is drawn of sweated maidens, ruining their health and their eyesight, in order to adorn the pampered bodies of millionaires' mistresses.

It did not affect me that way. For several reasons:

(a) Because the maidens were highly paid, blooming, and obviously very pleased with life.

(b) Because this particular dress, at any rate, was going to be worn by a film star who happens to work like a horse.

(c) Because . . . well, for rather a subtler reason. Because there is something rather beautiful in the thought that the world is still being given fabrics so precious, work so fine. Because it increases a woman's respect for her own hands to realize that, after all, they are more sensitive and valuable than any machine.



C H A P T E R   X I I I

D I V E R T I S S E M E N T

I

It may seem unfortunate, to the old-school-tie brigade, that the only hero who has yet emerged from our survey of modern England should be a dress-designer.

There was a time when I would have suggested that this was all to the good, when I would have found it hard to resist the temptation to observe that it is surely more civilized to drape a shawl over a woman's shoulders than to engage in activities which must eventually end in drawing a shroud over her face.

'Sister Susie's sewing shirts for soldiers' was a dirge which I would willingly forget. It haunted my schooldays. It would be much more pleasant to dilate upon the comparative prettiness of the paillettes which Susie is sewing to-day.

But though it might be more pleasant, it would not get us very far. Therefore the figure of the dress-designer (of whom I am personally very fond) throws a shadow over these pages, instead of lighting them with his own gaiety. He becomes a symbol.

He becomes a symbol of softness.

Still we must do the best with what we possess. And after all, if it is England's destiny to become a little nation, whose people engage themselves in entertaining the world rather

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than in ruling it, we may find, in the long run, that it is a much pleasanter country to live in.

The transition may be painful, of course, but when it is accomplished we shall at least be able to relax, after all these centuries of struggle, and sit back in our faded stalls, in our ancient dress-suits. We shall be able to content ourselves with watching mimic dramas, while the real dramas of the world are played out by other nations, on stages so distant that the echo of their strife hardly reaches us.

In these circumstances, it behoves us to salute the hero of the English future. And I think we shall not be far wrong if we decide that he will be either a film star or a ballet dancer. It is surely not quite without meaning that the greatest new English industry which has grown up in the past ten years, is the cinema industry. While agriculture slowly dies, while civil aviation staggers from failure to failure, the cinema marches triumphantly on.

Nor again is it without meaning that the one place in modern London where you will discover enthusiasm so intense that it borders on hysteria is the ballet at Sadler's Wells.

No statesman, no sportsman, no philanthropist, no scientist, no demagogue nor any popular English figure ever receives a fraction of the applause which, like a wave of sound surging from floor to roof, rocks the auditorium as the figures of the ballet sway forward to take their bows.

We should be churlish if we grudged the dancers their success. They are among the most charming people in the world, and at least they have created something which is very much alive.

I make no apologies for asking you to pay them a visit.

## D I V E R T I S S E M E N T

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that they are probably the most energetic people whom we shall encounter in modern England.

### I I

Edmund Kean, sword in hand, richly caparisoned in the robes of Richard III, stares down from the wall in astonishment.

Can this really be the ancient theatre of Sadler's Wells? A hundred years ago, by the light of the gas flares, he used to hold audiences spellbound in it. But now, it is so tall, so immense, so new.

And what is going on below him? Who are these young women in their black knitted tights and these young men in shorts, who are performing such angular and uncomfortable evolutions? Actors? Obviously not. Dancers? An uncomfortable suspicion enters Kean's head that this *may* be some form of ballet, but really, it is so strange. In Sadler's Wells of all places!

Kean is right. A few years ago a scene like this could not have been found in England. You could have discovered ballet rehearsals, of course . . . for ever since Nijinski leapt out of the East, in 1912, and landed on the stage of the old Alhambra in a shower of golden stars, England has been ballet-conscious. That is to say England has paid homage to the quantities of ladies whose names end in 'ova' and to quantities of gentlemen whose names end in 'ski'. But the idea that English people could dance, and dance superbly, was too absurd to contemplate.

## NEWS OF ENGLAND

The very phrase 'British Ballet' seemed a contradiction in terms. It suggested dairy-maids panting round a Maypole and fairy queens angrily waving tinselly wands at all and sundry. It suggested a great deal of bouncing, and confusion and heat, to the inevitable accompaniment of Mr. Edward German's dirge-like refrains from *Merrie England*.

It is, for example, entirely *new* that a permanent British ballet has gone to Paris (as the Sadler's Wells Company went last year), to be received with rapturous notices by critics who had come with the full intention of being rude.

It is, again, entirely *new* that a tradition comparable with the glamorous traditions of old St. Petersburg should be associated with British ballet. But at Sadler's Wells these traditions are slowly springing up. For instance, that in the ballet 'Apparitions' there is never any applause till the end, and woe betide the newcomer who breaks this rule. The silent house freezes him. There are traditions about dressing-rooms, about lucky nights and unlucky nights. There are traditions about members of the audience . . . about little old Miss B, who has attended every performance since the ballet was born, and always drifts vaguely to the dancers at the stage door with: 'Thank you, dears, for so much beauty.'

It is again, entirely *new* that English aristocrats like Lord Berners and the Sitwells (who are artists first and aristocrats second) should devote their genius to writing the music and composing the themes of ballets. Entirely *new* that on a ballet first-night in this theatre of poorer London, ladies plastered with paillettes and reeking of Schiaparelli No. 82b should be delighted to scramble for five-shilling seats, and, which is even more astonishing, should show an intelligent

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interest in the proceedings, and never once observe how quaint it is to go to Sadler's Wells.

Let us therefore examine more closely the rehearsal which was bringing such a puzzled look on to the face of Edmund Kean.

### I I I

The first thing to notice is that the whole company is laughing.

The ballet mistress laughs. The accompanist laughs. The choreographer laughs. The boys and girls laugh. If you have ever watched a rehearsal of Russian ballet, where everything is deadly serious, and where the smile of the prima ballerina is as warm as the gleam of moonlight on a grave, those high spirits are all the more remarkable.

They also remind us that one of the things which the English spirit can contribute, and is contributing, to the art of ballet, is humour. Not the humour of the Russian, which, to the Western mind, is permeated with *malaise*, but the riotous, animal humour which was expressed, in the April of England, by Chaucer, and has sparkled through English art and letters ever since.

That is why a ballet like 'The Rake's Progress' could only have been created in England, because only England could have created the Hogarth who inspired it. The purist who thinks that all ballet must be judged by the standard of which the abstract loveliness of 'Les Sylphides' is the summit, and even that section of the public whom Diaghileff educated to accept a far wider interpretation of the word

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'ballet', will protest that 'The Rake's Progress' is not ballet at all. It is too 'literary'. There is too much acting in it, too little concentration on pure form. It is therefore bad art.

We may safely leave such criticisms to the verdict of posterity. But we did not come to Sadler's Wells to indulge in arguments about the aesthetics of ballet, but to learn a little more about the inside, and particularly the personalities, of this new art which has sprung up in Britain.

I will confine myself to two artists I happen to know well, Frederick Ashton and Robert Helpman. Frederick is the finest choreographer that this country has produced. And though Robert Helpman may not be, technically, the finest dancer, he is a good deal more interesting than many who leap into larger print.

### I V

I always think of Freddie Ashton against a background of yellow. For it was he who was responsible for the choreography of 'Daffodils', a scene from a revue of mine called *Floodlight*. This revue, for the startling period of almost nine weeks, enraptured small but courageous audiences at the Saville Theatre, London, in the summer of 1937.

There may be a few laymen of the theatre (though I doubt if such exist to-day), who wonder, as they sit in their stalls, how it all happens. How the music for the little ballet which they are observing is written, how the young females before them are gathered together to interpret it . . . and how, when, and above all, *why*, it is decided that at a certain

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juncture they extend their wrists to the right, and at another juncture they protrude their knee-caps to the left, in co-ordination with a flute obligato.

We will not bother about my end of the business. It would take far too long to explain why the reading of Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' suddenly suggested a tune, and even longer to explain how one eventually got somebody to listen to it.

So let us go straight to Freddie Ashton.

There he stands, in the barren room, a very ordinary-looking young man, in a lounge suit, with his young women in front of him. They wear shorts, trousers, serge skirts, every sort of costume. He stands there, quite still, looking towards them, but not seeming to see them. And then he moves his arm in a sudden curve, and drops on to his knee, and stares up to the ceiling. Gets up again. Moves his arm in a wider gesture, drops on to his knee again, and throws his body back in a pose which, in spite of the double-breasted suit and all the accoutrements of polite civilization, is somehow beautiful.

Then he gets up, abruptly, and claps his hands, and shouts 'Music, please!' rather angrily.

'Now follow me!'

The music tinkles. The piano is out of tune. And the pianist is so rhythmic, that you want to yell. This is not rhythm but metronomy (if there is such a word), and each bar is an iron band, fastened with four crotchets of steel. Yet, in spite of it all, something beautiful is being born. Those waving arms of Freddie's, which the chorus girls try to follow, those apparently aimless legs, which trace such apparently purposeless designs, are nevertheless creating a

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pattern which is visible in spite of the uncompromising prose of the surroundings, like daffodils seen dimly in the distance . . . shining, far away, through the mist.

### v

Needless to say, the creation of a whole ballet is a task of far greater intricacy, than the arrangement of a single dance. And it could not be achieved without a deep sympathy, amounting to intuition, on the part of the dancers themselves.

Let us look at one of these dancers, in the person of young Robert Helpman, who has been the star of so many Sadler's Wells ballets.

As a small boy he was regarded as a monstrosity. For here was an infant who not only preferred to dance with leaves in the wind, when he ought to have been playing football, but stoutly proclaimed his intention of continuing to do so when he grew up. This perversion was all the more regrettable in Adelaide, Australia, than it might have been in a more sophisticated city. For Adelaide, Australia, from my recollection of it, is about the heartiest town in that very hearty continent, the sort of town where men catch hold of bulls by the horns as though they were playing a parlour game.

In spite of this, Master Helpman continued to dance, pointing his toes, kicking his heels, and replying to all criticism with an *entrechat*. The culminating point came when, still a little boy, he appeared at a school concert as a ballerina, and proceeded to dance the pizzicato in 'Sylvia',

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on his points. He did this with such brilliance that all the little girls were jealous, and wept to their mothers that this sort of thing, if allowed to continue, would set up a dry-rot in Australian youth, which was probably all too true.

And so it was stopped. No more dancing with leaves in the wind, not a single *entrechat*, and above all, no reference to that deplorable episode of '*Sylvia*'. Supposing he wanted to be Prime Minister! What would the opposition say when they learnt that he had once worn a ballet skirt? Supposing he wanted to be a general! Was it not evident that the morale of the troops would be ruined if it ever leaked out that their leader had once stood on his points?

To such arguments he listened. He appeared to agree. And then, Pavlova came to Adelaide. And Robert sneaked in to see her, and was lost. True, she was not at her greatest in that last tour . . . there were moments when those of us who knew her in the old days would rather have looked away, moments when a step faltered, when the winged feet flagged, and the smile, which had once seemed to spring from the joy of life, was like an agonized grimace. But Robert did not know that. He only knew that here was something more lovely than any bird in flight, a spirit which he could worship, which he *must* worship, in the only way that he knew, by dancing.

Potted careers are rather boring, so we will skip the rest. We will merely observe the irony of the fact that his first leading part, in the ballet of which he was to become the star, was not the role of *Sylvia*, but that of the prophet Job.

## NEWS OF ENGLAND

### VI

I have one serious criticism of the new British ballet, and that is that it is neither sufficiently new nor sufficiently British. It is still too charmed by the discovery that it can put on as good a 'Sylphides' as any which drifted before the court of ancient Russia. It has still to wipe out the last remains of the Russian trade mark from its ballet shoes, and stand, metaphorically, on its own feet.

For surely, the greatest of all choreographers is life itself. And life to-day is making men and women dance to a thousand new tunes which the contemporaries of Taglioni never heard, and would have rejected, had they heard them. It is forcing them to assume attitudes which become day by day more grotesque, and thereby more valuable to the creator of ballet, who seeks to synthesize these broken rhythms into a pulsating unity. One has only to travel in an underground railway, for example, to receive the inspiration for a dozen ballets. What could be more exciting, more capable of rhythmic treatment, than a row of strap-hangers? There they jog and sway, with pale, masked faces, their hands raised to heaven as though in supplication. Backwards and forwards to the harsh music of the wheels, strung up on the gibbet of modern business, with the greens and yellows and scarlets of the whisky advertisements behind them.

What could be stranger, more inspiring, than the crowds that sweep up and down the giant escalators . . . like some parody of the Last Judgment, the souls ascending to heaven and the souls descending to hell? Stiff and silent, and

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expressionless, they stand, in a hundred weird poses . . . some sternly erect, others broken with fatigue. And always there are a few (they are the principals in the ballet), who dart lightly through the ranks, curving this way and that with astonishing agility, and leaping off the staircase, at the top, with a flutter of a mackintosh.

The queues that swarm round the booking office, with the music of pennies and sixpences, the clang of the gates and the inevitable late-comer, locked out, like love, with the harsh shadows of the lift-bars slashed across her face, the scurry down the spiral staircase, and always, the fierce colours of the advertisements, the splashes of yellow that announce the birth of the crocuses at Kew, the coral pink of toothpastes as they curve, like snakes, on to Brobdingnagian brushes, and the blues, the heavenly blues, of the sea and the sky in the Bovril advertisements.

It is from these things that the ballet of the future must draw its inspiration, if it is to survive. From the splendours of cinema attendants, with their Moorish hats, Tyrolean jackets, and Metro-Goldwyn breeches, stalking over carpets of marsh-like softness, flitting through the gloom, waving silver torches. From Red shirts, Black shirts, Brown shirts . . . from the flutter of flags over the puppet orators in Hyde Park, from the whites and creams and ivories of a milk-bar, from the penny-in-the-slot machines on Brighton pier where, through a pane of salty glass, one can see the toy footballers jerking to and fro, and the tin horses scampering over a foot of faded baize, and the eternal gypsy, whose warning flutters through the slot on a piece of pasteboard and is carried off, with shrill giggles, by girls on holiday, who read it to their swains, while the seagulls scream above.

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From the petrol-pumps, which stand, like the idols of some savage race, waiting to pour out their spirit for the worshippers of speed. Waiting, on the roads that sweep to the North, to give fresh life to a generation which drinks deeply from their wells . . . waiting to speed their disciples on to death. From the iron-roofed shelters that have sprung up, along these roads, where the lorry-drivers come in the small hours, tired, lurching, lined with dust and grease, to drink synthetic coffee under the swaying light of an oil lamp.

## C H A P T E R X I V

### W A V E L E N G T H

#### I

WELL, we are getting on. We have already discovered two national heroes in this modern England of ours.

A dress designer and a ballet dancer.

It might have been more impressive, from the point of view of national prestige, if we had been able to point to some great statesman, or scientist or philosopher, but however hard we search, we cannot find such a person.

Of course, there is always Lord Nuffield . . . as we have had occasion to remark before. But although he is the ideal millionaire, he shows no indication of any desire to emerge into public life. His excursions into politics have been forced upon him. He is like a spectator at a bull-fight who is so exasperated at the inefficiency of the matadors that he leaps into the arena and stuffs the red rag down their own throats.

A great revivalist would have been something to boast about. But where shall we find him? The word revival, as applied to modern England, sounds oddly unconvincing. Women's dresses, yes. Ballet, yes. Dog racing, yes. But what else?

Consider the question of agriculture. More than any other industry, it serves as a barometer of national virility. What does this barometer tell us?

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It tells us that since 1921, the number of arable acres of England and Wales that have gone out of cultivation is 2,600,236.

It gives us the following table of losses for crops:

|          |               |
|----------|---------------|
| Oats     | 926,943 acres |
| Barley   | 612,620 ,,    |
| Wheat    | 245,004 ,,    |
| Potatoes | 122,700 ,,    |

It also informs us that in the same period the number of workers who have drifted away from the land is 122,700.

So if we are looking for a national hero we shall not find him, presumably, among the ranks of the ministers of agriculture.

We had better stick to the trades of light entertainment. These seem to be our chief glory in the modern world.

Any consideration of entertainment must obviously involve an examination of the B.B.C.

When we have made this examination we can ask ourselves what it has taught us. But for the moment, let us have a rest and pay a visit to one of the most fascinating buildings in the world, about which the average Englishman knows little . . . Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W.1.

### I I

I sat in a tiny room of the B.B.C., rumbling.

I was rumbling because it was twenty-five minutes to seven, in the morning, and I had not had any breakfast.

## WAVE LENGTH

Normally, this natural and not unpleasing sound would not have discomfited me. But at the moment it was embarrassing. For the red light had just gone on, there was silence in the room (apart from the involuntary vocalization of my inside), and the broadcaster was craning over the microphone, waiting for the signal that would tell him to begin his summary of the news.

He was broadcasting to Australia. Supposing I rumbled all the way out there. It might have terrible consequences. Yet, it was fascinating too. I thought of rumbling over the Alps, across the Himalayas, bridging the Indian Ocean and finally bursting, like a roar of thunder, over Sydney Bridge. The thought was so tremendous that something in me seemed to contract, and hey presto! the rumbling ceased. Only just in time too, for at that moment, the broadcaster leant forward and said, 'Good evening everybody'.

It was really to hear him say 'Good evening everybody', an hour before breakfast, that I had risen at this unearthly hour and gone to Broadcasting House. It was the only way in which an unscientific person like myself could get a real impression of the miracle of Empire broadcasting. Most of us are inclined to think of the B.B.C. as an institution that begins at ten in the morning with the weather reports, and ends at midnight with the jazz bands. We do not realize that Broadcasting House never sleeps, that its studios are always open, its cafés always serving food, its great elevators perpetually in motion, its voice speaking, almost ceaselessly, to the Empire.

Let us sit together, in that little room, and think about it all for a minute. The red light is on. A clock on the wall, silently ticking the seconds, is the only thing that moves.

## NEWS OF ENGLAND

We hear the chimes of Big Ben. Then, 'Good evening everybody'. The broadcaster begins to read the news.

We need not listen to the news. Indeed, it would be difficult to do so, however exciting it might be. For . . . to unscientific people like ourselves . . . the whole of this broadcast is too uncanny, to allow us to concentrate.

Think of it! It is twenty-five minutes past seven, Greenwich time. That means that it is six-thirty in Australia.

It is the beginning of our Autumn. Mists in Hyde Park, frost on the dahlias. It is the beginning of their Spring. The blue mountains beyond Melbourne will be very clear this evening and the wattle will be at its best.

Here we will soon be drinking our coffee. There they will soon be drinking those cocktails that are made from passion fruit.

Here, in the fading plane-trees, the sparrows are chirping. There, perched in the pale boughs of the gum-trees, you will be able to see the solemn magpies . . . perhaps, if you are lucky, the green of a parrot's wings.

I think of sitting out there, in an Australian garden, as I have so often sat, listening to the queer, hoarse Australian sounds that you hear in any of their gardens that are not too near the town. The chirp of the crickets. The drone of the big black flies. The metallic rustle of the eucalyptus leaves in the Southern wind. The mad, distant cackle of the laughing jackass. And the almost imperceptible sigh of masses of mimosa, swaying on overladen branches.

I think of turning on the radio, in this garden.

'London calling.' The bells of Big Ben. An agonizing nostalgia. How clear it all is . . . the music might come from next door. They are playing an early symphony by Mendel-

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ssohn. It is a very simple symphony, in which the lines of melody and counter-melody stand out as brightly as if they were coloured ribbons. You can almost see the uplifted baton of the conductor, the concentrated faces of the audience, and you can imagine, outside the concert hall, the lights of the buses, the lamps shining through the fog, the crowds on the pavements. . . .

That is the mood into which this music might take you. Then look at this picture . . . the reality.

### I I I

During this meditation, we must explain, the broadcaster has finished his news-summary, the red light has been switched off, we have smoked a cigarette, drunk a cup of coffee, and transported ourselves to another part of the building.

It is now the respectable hour of a quarter to eight. But the symphony orchestra which we see before us has been rehearsing since a quarter to six. As some of its members live in the suburbs they will have risen not later than five. It must be a strange feeling, rising in the dark, and hurrying to dress, because you will shortly be required to blow a flute to Australia, in order that you may have enough money to pay the rent. But then, all the interactions of commerce, of art and of money are strange if you examine them, closely enough, as strange as the interaction of Nature, who had to arrange the birth and death of countless millions of creatures under the sea, who had to cause immense cataclysms and

## NEWS OF ENGLAND

upheavals of soil before man could be provided with a piece of chalk with which to write his name on a blackboard.

The orchestra plays on. The musicians are unshaven, some of them are dark under the eyes, and look as though they would like a good hot bath. But you would not guess this from their interpretation.

We close the double glass windows of the studio. We can hear them no more. We can now talk.

I ask the announcer to explain how the wireless waves work. He does so, with great clarity. A child could understand every word he says. I cannot understand one. Apparently some of the waves bounce about over India quite a lot. That is all I got out of it. So we concentrated on a subject which was less obscure to me — propaganda.

He was an intelligent young man — by which I mean of course, what every man means when he calls another man intelligent, i.e. that he has the same ideas as himself. He thought that one of the gravest dangers to modern civilization was the way in which the younger generation can be dragooned into thinking anything that the gang in charge may desire them to think.

'If Stalin wanted every Russian child to believe that all the workers in capitalist countries worked in chains, not only metaphorically but literally, he could do it,' he said. 'If Hitler wanted the younger generation to believe that all Jews had tails, he could do it.'

'But surely,' I said, 'the wireless can fight against that? You can ban newspapers, you can burn books. But you can't close the air.'

'Can't you?' He looked at me and smiled. 'You can, as a matter of fact. You can 'jam out' other countries. But

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that isn't the way the dictators choose to work. There's a much simpler way.'

'What's that?'

'Forbid your people to own a wireless set that is capable of picking up any but your own stations. They've started that already. It isn't easy. Obviously there'll be leakages . . . just as there will always be a few forbidden newspapers and books that get smuggled through the customs. But on the whole, its effective.'

This information depressed me. However much one may condone certain aspects of authoritarianism, this destruction of opposition, this utter ban on the free interchange of ideas, is repellent to any Englishman. I had comforted myself with the thought that the wireless was a sort of wind of liberty, that would always blow round the world, ruffling the decrees of the dictators, blowing authoritarian cobwebs out of ignorant minds. After all, in my country cottage I had listened, night after night, to the charming economic fairy tales from the Moscow propaganda station. I had also listened, on the Riviera, to a cultured Englishwoman, retailing from Rome the Italian version of the war in Abyssinia . . . a version which was calculated to give the average Englishman high blood-pressure, and fill him with a desire to grind large stones into the stomach of the lady who was speaking.

But apparently, in the countries where, in the delicate phrase of Mussolini, 'liberty is to be regarded as a stinking corpse', these things are no longer possible.

It is a saddening thought.

Even the wind is in chains.

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### I V

To me the most interesting fact about modern British broadcasting is to be found in a room where very few people would think of looking for it. Not in the study of Sir John Reith, the hard-headed, soft-hearted dictator of the B.B.C. . . . a man who, whatever his critics may say about him, carries out a difficult task with a minimum of error. Not in any of the luxurious studios. Nor even in the great transmission room (if that is its name) which looks like a scene from 'The Shape of Things to Come', with its myriads of steel knobs and coiling wires.

The room which, to me, houses the most interesting feature of modern broadcasting is quite small, though in ten years' time it will surely be one of the biggest and most important rooms in the building. It is the room where they keep the gramophone records.

I do not mean things like Columbia Record A42856 on which Miss Smith has rendered 'Moonlight Fancies', on the xylophone. I refer, firstly, to the already large and swiftly growing collection of historical records — starting with Mr. Gladstone speaking into a phonograph to Mr. Edison and carrying us down, through all the principal statesmen, to the abdication of Edward VIII and after. This collection, which becomes daily more representative, will enable the children of the future to enjoy a privilege similar to that which would be enjoyed by a child of to-day if, for example, his teacher could turn on an actual record of Queen Elizabeth addressing her troops at Tilbury.

The other class of record, which, though it may not be

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of such educational value, will obviously tremendously widen the scope of entertainment, is so varied that one can only classify it by saying that it 'catches the sounds of modern life'. The sounds of a miner's pick, far below the Welsh soil, the sounds of the traffic in Trafalgar Square, 1938, the sound of waves beating in some terrible storm. The possibilities are obviously endless and they are not made any the less exciting by the possibilities of television or of the cinema.

The growth of this record room is one of the many signs of the rapidity with which, in this age, everything is changing. For as it grows, so the 'Effects' room shrinks. Supposing we pay the 'Effects' room a visit, before we go to the record room. It will soon, in all probability, have only an historical interest.

## v

### *The Tempest*

#### Act I

#### Scene i

Fade-in to tempestuous noise of thunder, wind, shipwreck and cries of mariners.

- (a) Storm at sea.
- (b) Ship creaking.
- (c) Sea wash.
- (d) Sea wash plus mariners' cries.

Fade down and out.

Enter Prospero and Miranda.

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That is how William Shakespeare appears on the script of a radio programme in 1938.

The script lies in front of a young man, wearing headphones, through which he is kept in touch with the passage of the play. As the signal flashes in front of him, he sets some records in motion. A small boy in a corner tiptoes over to a sheet of metal and shakes it, producing a very fair imitation of thunder. With his other hand he sets in motion a wind-machine. He seems to be enjoying himself. If you put your ear to the headphones, while all this is going on, you will hear an admirable version of a gale and the distant cries of shipwrecked sailors.

This is one of the few occasions at the B.B.C. when you can still see them using this old-fashioned sort of 'effect'. Probably by 1940 there will hardly be a sound, whether of the elements, or of animals, or of slamming doors or clattering hoofs, which is rendered by any other means than the gramophone.

The various sounds of life which are still created by mechanical devices are as follows:

*Horses hoofs.* This is made by two empty coco-nut shells, held upside-down, and tapped on a tray of sand or pebbles. It is very realistic, as you will learn if you try for yourself. You can make the horse gallop or trot or go lame, according to your fancy.

*Thunder.* This is caused by a large sheet of flexible iron, hanging from the ceiling. You take hold of a corner of the iron and shake it. This needs rather more skill than the hoofs, because if you shake too hard it sounds like an old-fashioned melodrama.

*Rain.* This is done by a roller-skate inside a tank. Why

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this should sound like rain, I cannot imagine, but it does. There is also another sort of rain, which is simply a shower falling into a bath of water. It sounds very like a shower falling into a bath of water.

*Wind.* This is a fan inside a cage. Very windy indeed.

*Aeroplane.* A metal disc rotating against a drum. This is the best 'effect' of all, and may be one of the very few which will not be superseded by gramophone records.

Various obvious sounds which occur in plays will probably also be retained, such as the slamming of a door, which is done with a real door, the turning of a key in a lock, the sliding of a bolt, the opening of a window.

However, it is probable that everything else will be recorded. We have seen, above, how even the opening of *The Tempest*, with its Thunder and Wind and Rain, was illustrated by the gramophone.

This may depress some people. It is bad enough to know that the wind which howls at you from your loud-speaker is, in reality, only a fan turned on by a little boy with tousled hair, but it is even worse to know that it blew perhaps years ago, and is just being recreated by a tired young man setting a needle on to a sheet of wax.

However, it should not really depress us. Because the possibilities of the records are so vast. We will now go and hear some of them.

## V I

'Well, what would you like to hear? We've got an unbroken chain of American presidents, from Theodore Roosevelt onwards. We've got, naturally, all the great

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singers . . . Patti singing "Home Sweet Home"? But then, you can hear that anywhere.'

'Florence Nightingale if you like. That's rather a thrill, though you'd probably be more excited by some of the records of the Treaty of Versailles . . . Venizelos addressing the Peace Conference for example. Then there are the speeches which men like Winston Churchill made just after the Armistice in 1918. Some of them make pretty funny reading now.'

'But of course, if you're really interested in the past, we'd better turn on Gladstone for you.'

Turn on Gladstone! There was something almost uncanny in that phrase. Most of us are old enough to have met men who, in moments of crisis, may be counted upon, sooner or later, to sigh: 'Oh for an hour of Gladstone.' But for the majority of us, Gladstone is as dead, in the sense of being part of history, as George Washington or, for that matter, William the Conqueror.

It was therefore with the keenest interest that I saw the record placed on the machine. This record is one of the oldest records extant. It was made on one of Edison's first phonographs. The tradition is that Gladstone sat on one side of the table and Edison on the other, and that Gladstone spoke impromptu, on the spur of the moment. One would like to know more of that historic meeting. However, the main fact is that as far as I am aware, the authenticity of the record has never been questioned.

The record began to turn. And then came the voice. Rich, varied, unmistakable. And as I listened to it I realized, with a sense almost of triumph, that it was the voice that I had always guessed it to be, the voice with which I

## WAVE LENGTH

had always, in imagination, endowed him. It was the voice of a ham actor.

This is what he said:

'My dear Mr. Edison, I am profoundly indebted to you for not the entertainment only, but for the instruction it has been my privilege to enjoy. The request which you have just made of me, to receive a record of my voice, is one which I cheerfully comply with so far as it lies in my power, though I regret to say that the voice which I transmit to you is only the very common organ the employment of which has been overstrained. Yet I offer to you, so much as I possess, and so much as old age has left to me, with the utmost satisfaction as being a deep testimony to the instruction and delight . . .' (here the record breaks off).

Not very much to go upon there, you may say. Nothing that would afford the historian any valid excuse for revising his estimate of Gladstone's character. Perhaps not . . . although the reference to his voice as a very common organ, when he knew perfectly well that it was nothing of the sort, has, to me, a ring of very unpleasing complacency. But the sense of the words is of secondary importance. It is the way those words are said, the carefully calculated rise and fall of the practised orator — an orator who had orated so long that he could speak no more — and above all, the bogus vibrations of 'sincerity' which told me so much.

I must apologize for attempting to translate, at such length, a sensation which is essentially untranslatable. It would have been better to say that his voice was the voice of a ham actor, and leave it at that.

But one thing we can say, with certainty, and that is that no man could attempt to speak in the cadences of Gladstone

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to-day, and get away with it. He would be laughed off the platform. I do not feel this about Disraeli, nor about many far earlier statesmen. Canning, at his most florid, would still thrill the House of Commons, and you would hardly have to alter a word of the speeches of Fox and Pitt (though Burke would prove more than a little embarrassing). But Gladstone . . . oh, the hollowness of that thunder, the shabbiness of that rhetoric, revealed for all time on that disk of wax!

We might stay for hours in the record room. One of the most interesting of its developments is the fact that it is now possible to 'touch up' voices almost as effectively as the photographer can 'touch up' faces. While I was there I listened to a speech by a certain politician which had been treated in this manner. During this speech he had come a howler on the word 'exploratory'. It stuck in his throat, again and again, like a verbal breadcrumb. The speech had to be relayed on the following day. When he listened in, the politician, to his delight, found that he sailed over the word 'exploratory' with complete smoothness. His friends were pleased but puzzled, his enemies disgusted. Only the men at the B.B.C. knew how it was done.

It would be pleasant if there existed some spiritual recording apparatus which could call back, from the ether, some of the cruel and bitter things which we have said in our life-time and send them out again, into space, cleansed from all offence.

### VII

This is, admittedly, a very fragmentary sketch of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

## WAVE LENGTH

No institution has been more hotly criticized, with less reason. Compared with most foreign services it is, politically a model of restraint. On the other hand, far from being dull, it has frequently led the way, not only in the originality of its entertainment, but in the efficiency of its technique.

America may be able to employ higher-priced stars but there is something a little irritating, to most Englishmen, in the thought of Beethoven 'coming to you through the courtesy of Halitosine, the world's most powerful mouth-wash'. When I hear that sort of thing, on American radio stations, a faint but cloying aroma of disinfectant seems to permeate even the most spiritual phrases of the Ninth Symphony. It is far worse in France, where that admirable liqueur, Banania, is plugged so energetically that even a Chopin nocturne irrelevantly suggests the robust rhythms of 'Yes, we have no bananas'.

As for the authoritarian states . . . well, we have had our say about them. They have chained the winds of imagination, and harnessed the great tides of thought. It is strange that, without exception, all the great dictators are music-lovers. Their favourite metal is iron. Yet, here they are, in their spare moments, playing with quicksilver.

Between these two extremes, the extreme of irresponsible commercialism and the extreme of equally irresponsible authoritarianism, the B.B.C. stands, quietly offering her wares to the world. She does not shout like a huckster, nor swear like a recruiting sergeant. But in the long run I feel that her voice will be heard most clearly, for it speaks in a language that is as free as the world-wandering wind.



C H A P T E R   X V

S O F T L Y ,   S O F T L Y ,   C A T C H E E  
M O N K E Y

I

WE have now three heroes of the New England.

A dress designer, a ballet dancer, and a broadcaster.

To this strange trio we can now add a fourth, who will make the collection even more bizarre . . . a policeman.

American film-stars, when they are hard up for anything to say to interviewers about this country, usually observe, 'I think your police are wonderful'. The phrase has become so hackneyed that it is now treated as a joke. It is, however, one of the most penetrating things that the film star could say.

Our police *are* wonderful. If the Empire was run as efficiently as Scotland Yard and its affiliated forces, there would be little to complain about.

In spite of this, crime is not decreasing. It is being held in check, but with unceasing effort. Most Englishmen, who regard themselves as members of a law-abiding community, have little realization of the tremendous impetus which the great war gave to every sort of crime in this country. We were given to understand (in common with our allies and our enemies) that the soul of our nation was being 'cleansed'. Actually, of course, it was being unutterably degraded. You

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do not 'cleanse' a man's soul by ordering him to commit legal murder, for four long years, any more than you 'cleanse' his uniform by making him stand knee-deep in mud, for a similar period.

The post-war statistics for crime show as startling an increase over the pre-war figures as the increase in the national expenditure. And just as we seem unable to lessen our annual budget of money, so we seem equally unable to lessen our annual budget of crime.

Thanks to Scotland Yard the criminal budget remains fairly stationary. But if we compare it with the pre-war budgets we shall have a shock.

For example, if we take a four years' average, we find that the crimes against property, with or without violence, show an annual increase of more than 133,000 over the pre-war figures. That does not seem to indicate that the 'cleansing' of the national soul was as thorough as Mr. Lloyd George would suggest.

We find again that there are more than double the amount of forgers, and that there is an increase of over a third in crimes 'against the person', that the increase in bigamy is two hundred per cent, and in 'unnatural' offences nearly three hundred per cent.

The only crime of importance which shows a steady decrease is the crime of murder.

I repeat, this is not the fault of Scotland Yard. The task of policing modern England is one which might defeat even the most ruthless dictator. And the way in which it is being done is one of the most instructive lessons which we could learn in our national psychology.

It is also one of the few bright spots to which the true

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lover of England (as opposed to the 'my-country-right-or-wrong' maniac) can point. We will therefore make the most of it.

### II

The curious words which form the title of this chapter hang on a placard in the Information Room at Scotland Yard. They have, as far as I am aware, no official recognition. They have appeared in no routine orders, and it is unlikely that they will ever intrude themselves into a speech at a formal banquet.

All the same, they are typical of the spirit of the new Scotland Yard.

'The worst offence of which a policeman can be guilty is to be rude.'

It was a chief inspector who said that to me. We were looking at the notice, and I had asked him if it had any special meaning. To the lay mind it suggests padded heels, muffled footsteps, dramatic tiptoeings down dark alleys. But it was a little subtler than that.

He went on to explain. 'It really means that in Scotland Yard we never admit that anybody is a fool. Supposing a young policeman rings us up here with some story that turns out to be a lot of nonsense. We don't bawl him out. If we did, we might never get another story from him. Policemen have got feelings, you know, like other men, though sometimes the public seems to forget it. No . . . we let him down lightly and tell him to try again.' He smiled. 'And next time he comes along,' he added, '*he may have meat to sell!*'

There was a time when such opinions, coming from an

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inspector who had earned his laurels in the ranks, would have been ridiculed. But times have changed.

The theme song of the policeman is no longer, 'Wot's all this 'ere?' The old days when he bent the knees, pushed back his helmet, scratched his head and noted irrelevant details in a much-thumbed notebook . . . these are gone for ever.

Scotland Yard actually dares to admit the word 'charm' as an attribute of which a policeman need not be ashamed. Nor is this charm only for the benefit of American debutantes, or film-stars who think that a boy in blue is a nice background for a blonde. It is a distinct asset in the detection of crime.

Think of that Information Room for a moment. Into it, from all over London, echo the cries of the distracted and the hysterical. Women in danger (or women who *think* that they are in danger, which is much the same thing). Desperate men. Fugitives. The accents are often broken, choked with fear or grief. The story is nearly always incoherent. Details are wildly inaccurate.

Of what use, in dealing with such cases, would be the old formula, 'Wot's all this 'ere?'? The man who is listening to these stories, through his earphones, has to be more than a mere collector of information. He has, somehow or other, to play the part of a father confessor, to put comfort into his voice. Otherwise he may gain nothing. He may lose his story altogether.

'Softly, softly, catchee monkey.'

When you look at that label you begin to understand the reason for the new trend in detective fiction. You begin to see why the conventional sleuth in the dressing-gown is

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losing so much of his glamour, and why he is being ousted, in the public imagination, by the quiet efficiency of the man with the helmet.

III

One of the reasons why the public does not appreciate the radical changes which have come over Scotland Yard,<sup>1</sup> is the fact that the Yard does not greatly care for advertisement.

In America, though the police department may not take its orders directly from Hollywood, the spirit of Hollywood permeates the whole force. Compare, for instance, the system of directing police cars from headquarters. The whereabouts of the cars are shown, in New York, by maps on which lights perpetually flicker. It looks very dramatic, but it is no more efficient, and a good deal more expensive, than the little brass labels which are quietly shifted, by hand, over our maps in London. In New York, when a police-car goes into action, the whole city is scared by the screaming sirens. In London, a private car slips unobtrusively out of the gates of the Yard. It causes no sensation. Nobody looks at it. All the same, it can travel at a hundred miles an hour, and it gets its man.

But though Scotland Yard may hate the idea of 'dressing up', there are departments in it which, to a policeman of the old-fashioned type, would have seemed almost theatrical. One of these is the Flag Room. That may not be its right name, but it is appropriate. And it would be well worth our while to visit it.

<sup>1</sup> These comments upon Scotland Yard apply with equal force to the provincial police.

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Here, on wooden stands, are immense maps that reach from floor to ceiling. Every map is speckled with a rash of brightly coloured flags.

The idea is to make statistics live. No policeman is going to get very worked up about quantities of figures in a book, printed in small type, and accompanied by the dry comments of officialdom. Even graphs are apt to lose their fascination, unless they hang over one's own bed when one's temperature is nearing the hundred and three's. But flags are different. They make you sit up and think . . . think clearly, too.

For example. Here, on this great map before us, the flags suddenly gather thick and fast. It is at a cross-roads. Down every street they march, till, at the junction they rally thickly together, in every colour of the rainbow. At first, it is rather thrilling. You feel that you are watching a pageant in miniature, played by toy soldiers. And then you realize that the pageant has a sinister twist. For this is the Accident Chart, and each flag represents death or injury on the King's highway.

From these flags you can learn, with a speed that would surprise you, everything there is to be known about accidents. You can learn how, when, why, and where you are most likely to be killed, injured or otherwise incommoded. You can learn what to seek, and what to avoid, what times of the day are most dangerous, and why. A couple of minutes on that map gave me a very clear picture of certain localities in London where I shall in future watch my step.

Here is another map, labelled Pickpockets. This map also is lamentably abundant in flags.

Let us put this map to the test. Let us ask it a question.

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'Would it be any use for me to walk along Oxford Street in the afternoon on the look-out for pickpockets?'

Oxford Street is a crowded thoroughfare. The afternoon is its busiest time of day.

But the map does not give the expected answer.

The map says, 'No'.

You see those flags along Oxford Street? Nearly all of the pins have scarlet heads. A scarlet head stands for night. There are plenty of them. But of the blue heads, which mark the afternoon, there is only one in the last five months. There are, however, a fair number of yellow, which mark the morning.

The map tells us a great deal more than that. Why do so many scarlet heads cluster together, at regular intervals, down the street? Ah . . . we understand. Those represent bus-stops. It is obvious, when you come to think of it. If you are waiting for a bus, especially the last bus at night, you are so anxious to catch it that you forget everything else. But it is not till you see the flags on the map that this simple fact becomes clear.

Those flags with mauve heads represent thefts in taxis. They tell us that a great many of those thefts took place after eleven o'clock, and that the majority were committed by women. If you think for a moment, you will be able to re-create a squalid little drama where a woman solicits a man in a bar, plies him with drink till closing time (eleven o'clock in this district), puts him into a taxi, and fumbles for his wallet while his arms are round her. And that is the true story, repeated with wearisome insistence, of those little mauve flags.

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### I V

Although the new Scotland Yard is one of the few really energetic organizations of modern England, it is to the provinces that we must look if we would realize the true romance of the war which we are waging against crime.

Of all the buildings which I have entered in the past year, in this country (and they have been many and various) none has fascinated me more than the Laboratory of Forensic Science at Nottingham. Of all the men I have met, none has proved more deeply interesting than the head of this laboratory, whom we will call Dr. H. He is an example of the fact that the country which produced a Sherlock Holmes of fiction is also capable of producing a Sherlock Holmes in the flesh. He would, in all probability, object to such a description. He would say that he is simply a scientist under the direction of the Home Office, working in conjunction with Scotland Yard or any other police force who may require his services. He would add that he is merely one of a large number of men, equally talented, whose services and intelligence are now at the country's disposal. I prefer to call him the modern Sherlock Holmes.

And of all the things he showed me, it was the seeds that interested me most.

There they lay, tray after tray of them, sealed in tiny glass tubes. Each tube was neatly labelled with the name of the wild plant from which it had been taken, the season at which the plant flowered and seeded, and the type of soil in which it thrived. There were many hundreds of these tubes, and it would be safe to say that they represented

## SOFTLY, SOFTLY, CATCHEE MONKEY

ninety-eight per cent of the flowers, grasses, reeds, crops and flowering shrubs which are to be found wild in the British Isles.

A pretty prospect for a botanist with a touch of poetry in him! For here, in these tubes, was such a potential blowing and growing, so many million embryos of colour and perfume, that it would need but a little imagination to think of them breaking out of their glass prisons and clambering in a riot of greens and pinks and blues over the city's black roofs.

But they would never break out, and indeed, there was nothing in their surroundings to encourage them to do so. Nothing but charts and test-tubes and the grimly efficient apparatus of a modern laboratory. And they themselves were born, not to give joy, not to thrust their tendrils into the earth and lift their leaves to the sky, but to be handed round in a court of law, to be peered at through microscopes, and possibly . . . to sentence a man to death.

For if some rare seed were found in the folds of a murderer's trousers, and if it could be matched by one of the seeds that slumbered in these phials, it might form a deadly link in a chain of evidence . . . it might prove conclusively that at a certain time a certain man had walked through certain fields, with murder in his heart.

It needs no very vivid imagination to grasp the immensities of the speculations which those tiny seeds might provoke . . . to pause in wonder at the thought of the strange and powerful destiny which may have been planned for even the lightest piece of thistle-down, drifting down the lane on a vagrant wind.

Dr. H. is in the mood for talking this afternoon. We will stroll round with him, and listen to what he has to say.

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It is fairly certain that, if we happened to be contemplating a crime at the beginning of the afternoon, we shall have given up the idea by the time that tea arrives . . . at least, as long as Dr. H. is around.

His collection of seeds, as we observed above, was an example of a scientific attitude to crime which is new in this country, except in the pages of fiction. And the making of this collection only served to emphasize the lack of similar collections, equally bizarre, but no less essential.

A collection of matches, for example.

Why has nobody ever thought of making a collection of matches before? Once the idea is put down on paper, it seems glaringly obvious. At a thousand street corners, criminals have paced up and down, glancing up at some dimly-lit window, lighting a cigarette, throwing it away after the first puff, lighting another, throwing it away again. The discarded cigarette, of course, may be evidence, but it is not nearly such valuable evidence as the match which lit it. If the night is dry the cigarette may burn out and leave nothing but ashes which blow away on the wind. If the night is wet, the paper will dissolve, and the tobacco be trampled into the mud. But the match remains. And sometimes that dead match may burn a hole in a very neatly fabricated alibi.

'Look here,' says Dr. H., pulling open a drawer. And as we peer inside, we see a tumbled heap of all sorts of strange matchboxes, filled, or half-filled, with their original contents.

'Here's one from Portugal. This tiny one here, he's Italian. That bundle over there represents most of the commonest French brands. That's an interesting one . . . it's only used on the Irish cross-channel boats.'

## S O F T L Y , S O F T L Y , C A T C H E E M O N K E Y

All of which makes one suspect that the perfect criminal of the future will be a non-smoker, as well as a teetotaller and a vegetarian.

Here is another collection. Woods. Every sort of wood you have ever heard of, and a good many that you haven't. Australian eucalyptus, common Canadian spruce, Norwegian silver birch, honest English oak. Why go to all this trouble? What will you ever be able to learn, say, from a piece of fibre from a Douglas fir?

Quite a lot, you will reply, after an afternoon with Dr. H. For you will have heard his story of a certain bullet which was fired at a yacht, from the banks of a river, one morning. You will have heard how there was a little speck of wood clinging to the bullet, which turned, under the microscope, into Douglas fir, with which the deck of the yacht was planked. You will have heard . . . but that is too long a story for these pages.

Collection after collection, you will find, in this strange museum. On its shelves you will find every sort of rope, string or twine which may one day be found, bound tightly round some ugly parcel in a dark room. You will find details of every sort of furniture, from the shoddiest rackety table to the alarming 'luxury suites' of the modern flat.

'I learnt all I could possibly learn about furniture,' said Dr. H., 'so that when I saw a fragment of it I could immediately say "Ah!"'

I would not like to be around when Dr. H. said 'Ah!' . . . if I had a guilty conscience.

You will find, too, every sort of fabric from which a suit is made. The sort of stuff that is used to stiffen the lapels

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of a suit which might be worn by a Whitechapel tough. The sort of padding that is used to broaden the shoulders of a young member of Buck's.

In fact, it would be easier to say what you would not find, either stored on those shelves or slumbering in Dr. H.'s brain. A host of silent evidence, waiting for the day when it may be wanted.

It makes one think. A flake of polish, a skein of thread, a scrap of sawdust, a withered leaf, a tiny feather ... created, with infinite ingenuity, over endless ages, to weigh down the scales of death, against a man who is himself the end of creation ... yes, it makes one think so hard that one wishes one had not the power of thought.

### v

Unless you have a morbidly sensational mind, the real fascination of this new science of detection does not lie in the discovery of exotic 'clues' to catch 'master criminals'. Rather does it consist in the neat dovetailing of the evidence of those everyday tragedies in which we may all be involved, with the laboratory as a new and powerful assistant, in the background.

Here is a perfect example of such a case.

One dark night Mr. Q——, who is by profession a labourer, emerges from a public-house at closing time, sniffs the cold air with appreciation, and begins to walk home.

He walks a little unsteadily, for Mr. Q——, if we must be frank, has had just one pint too many. And that last

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pint causes him to step into the gutter at the precise moment when a car is passing.

The next thing that Mr. Q—— remembers is waking up in hospital with a fractured skull, and a bitter resentment against the owner of the car, who had not stopped to pick him up.

Did he notice what the car looked like? No. Who was driving it? No. The colour? The number? No. Mr. Q—— had not been in a condition to notice anything at all.

And that is what the police have to work on.

The first thing the police do is to go to the pubs in the neighbourhood and make inquiries about the type of customer who was being served that night. That sounds a hopeless task, until you apply a little intelligence to it, when it will be found to narrow down considerably.

Firstly, the man was walking home on the left-hand side of the road, and as cars are perverse enough to drive on the left in England, the pub was presumably higher up the road.

Secondly, it was a poor district, where there were few cars, and none of them were owned by young men, but by fathers of families. Therefore a cheap car was indicated, or even a motor-bicycle.

Thirdly, there was probably a woman in the case, or rather in the car. The police are not cynics but they have learnt, from long experience, that in nine cases out of ten, when a man knocks somebody down and drives on, he is not an inhuman monster, nor is he afraid that he will be had up for manslaughter, but he *is* afraid of what his wife will have to say about the woman who, most regrettably, is sitting by his side.

All these points . . . the position of the pub, the age of the

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man, the character of the vehicle, and finally, the presence of the woman . . . were satisfied, with suspicious perfection, when the police discovered that among the customers that night in a pub higher up the road had been a grey-haired man, the owner of a motor bicycle with a side-car, who had with him a pretty young girl.

And when they further discovered that although he garaged his bicycle only some 200 yards farther down the road, he had not passed the policeman on point duty, but had turned off, and approached the garage by a circuitous route, things began to look very black for him indeed.

However, the English law is at its best when things look very black for a suspect. 'Things looking black ain't evidence', as a policeman once said to me. 'That's simply the time when the judge tells the jury to forget that the prisoner's got such an ugly face.' And it is quite possible that the net would never have closed round the unfortunate grey-haired man if it had not been for the Laboratory of Forensic Science.

It was to this laboratory that an enterprising young policeman arrived, on the following morning, with a burden of two human hairs. These hairs, he explained, had been found adhering to the mudguard of the side-car. Would Dr. H. kindly express an opinion?

Dr. H. put them under the microscope and expressed an opinion. They were human hairs, they were dark red, and they were healthy hairs, which had been pulled out by the roots, rather than dropping out. He expressed two other opinions, which were, firstly that the police should go to the hospital, and remove two hairs from the victim to see if they matched, and secondly, that they should search his clothes

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for any unusual material which might be adhering to them.

The hairs matched, as might be expected. And a tiny thread of some fibrous material was found in the lapel of the man's coat.

Now, one of the great difficulties of the modern Sherlock Holmes, bending over a test-tube in his laboratory, is that the amount of material at his disposal is so very limited. If he had yards of thread, sheets of blood-stained cloth, reams of faded paper, bags of mysterious nails, and so on, he would be able to make as many mistakes as he liked. But he never has these things. He has only a snippet of thread, a minute scrap of cloth, a tiny torn-off corner of a sheet of paper, and one rather mouldy nail. So he cannot afford to make any mistakes at all.

Nor did he in this case.

When Dr. H. had disintegrated the little thread in his laboratory, he rang up the police. 'That material you gave me is a fabric of split cane,' he said.

'Thank you very much,' said the police. With reason . . . for it was with split cane that the suspected side-car was covered.

## VI

I have dwelt at a certain length on this very ordinary, unsensational case, because it *is* so ordinary and unsensational. The virtuous section of the British public should gain comfort from the thought of the care and skill which is at their disposal. And the criminal classes, among whom my books are deservedly popular, should be correspondingly

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detarded. Every day that Dr. H. and his associates continue their activities, is a day nearer the doom of crime.

Consider this robbery, which was brought to light by the peculiar behaviour of a tiny scrap of stuff in a test-tube.

Not long ago the safe of a provincial co-operative store was broken open, and the contents rifled. The thief escaped in a stolen car.

When they arrested a suspect, it looked as clear a case as could be imagined. The floors of these co-operative places are always covered with sawdust. There was sawdust on the floor of the stolen car. There was also sawdust in the socks of the arrested man. What more could you want?

The English law wants a lot more, before it will convict on circumstantial evidence. Even when the laboratory had obtained samples of the sawdust from the store, from the original source of supply, from the car, from the socks and proved it to be all identical . . . (there are more varieties of sawdust than most of us would imagine) . . . the English law still demanded more.

It got it. Dr. H. noticed, in the samples of sawdust from the car and from the socks, a number of little brown flakes which looked exactly like the broken off pieces of tobacco from a cigar. He knew that one didn't buy cigars in a co-operative store, and he suspected that it was unlikely that the average customer would smoke them. So what the devil were they? I do not know how long it took him to find out, but he did find out. They were withered pieces of the skin of new potatoes.

He went to the telephone. (And this is when the authentic ring of Sherlock Holmes must have crept into his voice.)

## SOFTLY, SOFTLY, CATCHEE MONKEY

'By the way,' he said, 'are there any new potatoes in that store?'

'Yes, there are,' said the voice at the other end, with pardonable eagerness. 'There's a big case of them standing right up against the safe.'

And at that moment, I expect, the thief felt a shudder, as though a ghost were walking over his grave. The ghost of a new potato.

You learn a deal of curious information when talking to Dr. H. Not enough to set you up in a life of crime, perhaps, but enough to make you realize some of the more elementary pitfalls into which you may stray.

You learn, for instance, that if a signature is an absolutely perfect match of another signature, it is almost indubitably a forgery. You have never before signed your own name in exactly the same way as you signed it last time, and you will never sign it in exactly the same way in the future.

You learn a generalization which might well have been written up over the mantelpiece in Sherlock Holmes's study. 'The greatest evidential value resides in common things used for uncommon purposes.'

You learn that you never enter a room, however carefully, without leaving some trace of you behind, and that you never leave it, however innocently, without carrying some trace of it away with you.

You learn indeed, so much, that unless we tear ourselves away from Dr. H., there is a danger that the rest of this book will turn into a manual for the amateur criminal.



## CHAPTER XVI

### DISTRESSED AREA

#### I

FOR the last four chapters we have been comparatively cheerful. We have seen our countrymen acting with energy and resource. It is true that the energy has been directed towards objects which cannot be described as of vital importance, and that the resource is of a negative nature, in that it is preventive rather than creative. However, let us be thankful for small mercies.

It would be pleasant if the rest of the book might continue in the same strain, if we could feel that we have said the worst that is to be said, and that for the remaining part of our journey we might dwell on brighter prospects. But though it might be pleasant it would not be very profitable. For no survey, however superficial, of Great Britain in 1938 would be complete without a picture of those areas which, for lack of a more vivid word, we politely call 'distressed'. And it is to those areas that we must now reluctantly turn.

There are times in life when platitudes suddenly become luminous, when old proverbs ring out with the challenge of trumpets. We have reached such a time in this book. We have all heard, and most of us have repeated, the saying that: 'One half of the world does not know how the other half lives.' There can be few who realize how bitterly true this is in our country to-day. It is almost impossible to believe that

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the picture I am compelled to paint, in the next few chapters, is drawn from life, that its setting is only a few hours' motor drive from London, the richest capital in the world, and that the year is 1938.

Yet, if you choose, you can get into the train, and verify all the facts. It is not a suggestion to be recommended if you have a sensitive nature. But for the adventurous it would be well worth while. It is not every country that offers you the opportunity of travelling, in a few hours, into a completely different world.

That was what I did, when I went down to Wales. If you doubt it, it will not be for long.

### I I

Something queer is happening . . . something we don't quite understand.

It was Friday when we left the bustle and scurry of Cardiff. Exactly ten o'clock on Friday morning, to be precise. But, now, only half an hour later, it is Sunday. All the Sundays that have ever been, rolled into one. Eternal Sunday.

Sunday stretches, like a grey mist, over the scarred hills that unroll before you as you approach the valley of the Rhondda. And the symbols of this unnatural Sunday all seem to be dressed in black, for even if their jackets were once brown or grey the coal dust has dyed them to its own colour, and they are now too lethargic to brush it off. Besides, in all probability, there is no such thing as a clothes-brush in the house. The average life of a clothes-brush cannot be much more than ten years. And it is a good deal longer that these men have been out of work.

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The car glides on. I wish that they had not washed it at the garage last night. It looks so sleek, so polished, so unpleasantly prosperous in this deepening desolation. Somewhere before Talbot Green there are some white geese, feeding in an allotment near a row of miners' houses. The geese sparkle across the valley like flecks of brilliant Chinese white on a sombre canvas. But there is nothing white after that. And as I drive cautiously down the narrow winding street of Tony Rafael, I feel that I am not only leaving the world behind, I am leaving time behind as well.

I stand on the side of a high hill, looking over Penygraig, in the heart of the distressed area.

You do not expect a mining district to be a beauty spot. But you do expect it to have a certain grim attraction, born of energy and power. The wheels of industry may not be lovely in themselves, but when they are whirring together they form patterns full of life. The smoke of industry may not be of the gayest colour, but even the blacks and greys that hang over factories can be lit by the sun, or by the blast furnaces, into hues and shapes which have a quality of beauty.

But here was only the ugly shell, without the life to light it.

A group of six young men, silent, dragging their feet, passed me, on their way down the hill. They walked as though they were following a funeral. As indeed they were, for each was following the hearse of his own hopes.

A syren, far below, announced noon. It came from one of the few mines that were still working. As I watched, I saw tiny black figures emerging from a side-street that led to the pit-head. It was heartening to see those black figures. They gave life to a landscape that was otherwise dead.

The sun glittered on row after row of hideous little houses

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with roofs of slate. From where I was standing you could see into the streets. At every corner were groups of black figures, leaning against the wall. The figures did not move. They stayed there, in strange, static groups. There was a sense that some gigantic, essentially sinister ballet was in progress, and that the figures were waiting for the conductor's wand to make them move.

I shuddered. Better move on. It would do no good to give way to one's feelings, like this, before one knew anything.

So I moved on, down into the valley. To ask a question, and to go on asking it, until I found the answer.

### III

The question to which I sought an answer was this:

'What was the nature of the mental disease engendered in the minds of men who been unemployed all their lives? And particularly, how did this disease affect the minds of the younger generation, for whom work was a strange myth, something that had existed long ago, but was now utterly and eternally extinct?'

In spite of the mournful nature of my task, there was excitement in it. As I drew nearer to the town I felt as some medical research worker might feel, on the track of some new, uncharted germ. That the germ existed, I had no shadow of doubt. Its symptoms were everywhere. And even if the symptoms had been less defined, one would have suspected the existence of the germ, for the simple reason that no such breeding-place of social maladies had ever existed in Great Britain before.

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What were these men thinking about? And what were they *doing*? Had they invented any new ways of killing time? Even if they stayed in bed till eleven every morning, there was still the rest of the day to account for. And not only the rest of the day, but the rest of 365 days . . . *ad infinitum*.

And what effect had all this had upon the children? It is easy enough to trace the medical effects resulting, let us say, from a war period of malnutrition. But what were the effects on a child's *mind* of this perpetual example of idleness? There are tens of thousands of families, in the valleys, who married on the dole. The children that are born from this state-supported union are not so far from the years when they will be marrying themselves, also on the dole. In other words, we are within measurable distance of the time when children will be born whose grandfathers, as well as their immediate parents, have never known work.

Well, what has it done for them?

After all, these men are our brothers. And even if you incline to the view that you are not your brother's keeper, you sit up and take notice if the doctor tells you that he is suffering from something which may be infectious.

## I V

We shall have to begin with some statistics. But we will try to see that they are not too boring.

It is horrible that they *could* strike anybody as 'boring', but that, after all, is the way of life.

One of the vilest things about the great war was the way in which the great majority of the civilian population

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gradually began to accept the casualty lists as nonchalantly as, to-day, we take the society gossip. Instead of every list being a record of agony and horror, a public affront to God, it became just . . . a casualty list. And unless you had a brother or a son at the front, it was as uninteresting, to the general public, as are the latest city prices to the man who has no investments.

There is a danger that this sort of apathy may extend to the distressed areas. Indeed as far as one can see, it has already extended.

The valleys are doomed. Nobody with any pretensions to authority any longer attempts to deny it. Even at the present rate of working, the coal industry will be completely defunct in South Wales in fifty years.

No other industry exists to which the people may turn. And so they are fleeing, as though from an invading army.

The extent of their flight is recorded in the following statistics.

Here are the figures showing the decline of population during the last ten years, in the Rhondda Urban district. The area, by the way, is about 23,000 acres.

|                  |         |
|------------------|---------|
| 1927             | 159,270 |
| 1929             | 153,100 |
| 1931             | 141,346 |
| 1933             | 142,230 |
| 1934             | 139,500 |
| 1935             | 137,200 |
| 1936             | 134,600 |
| 1937             | 129,900 |
| 1938 (estimated) | 124,000 |

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Now let us go to Penygraig or Tonypandy, and see what these figures really *mean* . . . study the outward and visible signs of this flight of thirty-five thousand people from the stricken areas.

It means, to begin with, that about one in every seven or eight shops is empty. At first, as you walk down the narrow streets, you are so overwhelmed by the ugliness and grime and general depression that you do not notice it . . . you feel like taking to your heels and running away, anywhere, up into the clean mountains. But gradually these empty shops begin to have their effect. The windows are heavily white-washed. The paint is peeling from the frames. And in each window hangs a notice, worded with unconscious irony, to the effect that this 'desirable' business is to let.

But it is not only the shops that are to let, but the houses as well. In street after street, uncurtained windows, with cracked glass, stare mournfully out at you. And that leads us to some more statistics. For here are the figures for the decline in rateable value, throughout this district, during the last eight years:

|      |          |
|------|----------|
| 1931 | £436,173 |
| 1932 | £409,848 |
| 1933 | £399,014 |
| 1934 | £394,065 |
| 1935 | £393,025 |
| 1936 | £391,908 |
| 1937 | £386,019 |
| 1938 | £384,000 |

Those figures tell a tale even more gloomy than you would think, when you know the human side of it.

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Years ago, back in 1921, when the post-war boom was at its height, there were many families who at last found it possible to save. When, to a single family, comes the immense income of six or eight pounds a week, some of this fabulous wealth must obviously be set aside for a rainy day. And it was set aside, most of it in house property.

To-day those thrifty families of the past have seen their savings go down and down. To keep their property at all they have to extort rents from other families who, as they know only too well, are quite unable to afford it. And this, in a little community where everyone knows everyone else, where no secrets are hidden.

It does not add to the sweetness of life.

### v

The generalizations which follow are the result of conversations with miners, ex-miners, schoolmasters, pub-keepers, casual 'pick-ups' in the street, and such a diversity of persons that there is not much danger that they are not reasonably representative.

The main question, about the mind of the younger generation, was soon answered. For there is no doubt whatever that over this generation there has spread, like mildew over an unused building, an appalling lethargy.

You will gain a fair idea of the mind of the young unhopeful of the valleys from a conversation. Here is one which I wrote down a few minutes after it took place.

X was a boy of sixteen who was always running away. He had been given a job of a pound a week in London and

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he had run away from it, back to South Wales. He had been sent to a holiday camp with a lot of other boys, and he had run away from that too.

He was a tall pale boy with large eyes. He stared out of the window all the time he was talking to me.

MYSELF. Why did you run away from camp? (*No reply*)  
Was it because you were bullied?

x. Bullied? What is 'bullied'?<sup>1</sup>

MYSELF. Knocked about by other boys.

x. Why should they knock me about?

MYSELF. Well, boys do, sometimes, don't they?

x. Not with us. Not unless they want to take something.

And we have none of us anything that they want to take.

MYSELF. Then why was it? Was the food bad?

x. No. The food was good.

MYSELF. Were you homesick, perhaps?

x. (*Laughter*).

MYSELF. Well, were you?

x. That is something that rich boys suffer from, isn't it?

MYSELF. Poor boys suffer from it too. If they are fond of their families.

x. (*With a momentary flash of bitterness*) And if they sleep with their families too? Four in a bed? (*One up to X, certainly, with that last remark.*)

MYSELF. Then why was it? There must be some reason, if you didn't want to go home, and weren't actually unhappy.

x. Not enough freedom.

MYSELF. How do you mean?

x. Not enough freedom.

<sup>1</sup> No attempt is made, in this, or any ensuing conversation to reproduce the Welsh dialect.

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He flatly refused to enlarge upon this statement. After he had slouched away, I sought out the teacher who had been in charge of the camp from which he had fled. He was a pleasant-looking young man with an engaging grin.

'Not enough freedom!' he said. 'So he told you that too? Well, let me tell you what he did whenever the boys had a couple of hours to themselves. *He went straight back to bed.*'

'Perhaps he wasn't well . . .' I began.

'Well? I had him medically examined. He's as strong as a horse. But on the sunniest, brightest days, instead of rambling about with the other boys, or bathing, or doing what the rest were doing, he simply retired to bed. There were about a dozen others who were just as bad. And when I routed them out . . . well, they didn't like it.'

And here is the interesting point. All of these boys who seemed to wish to do nothing but sleep all day came from families where *complete* unemployment had been the rule for over ten years.

They had seen their fathers lying in bed every day till noon, in order to save a meal. They had seen their elder brothers doing the same thing . . . sleeping by the fire, sleeping all over the place, *afraid* to be fully awake.

And they too had come to the conclusion that life is but a sleep and a forgetting.

At sixteen years of age!

### V 1

So much for the younger generation. What about their fathers?

You may remember that one of the questions I set out to

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answer was 'had the unemployed found any new way of killing time? Had they discovered any defence against the ironical blessings of the Age of Leisure?'

Yes. They have found one defence. There is one thing left.

It is not hope, for he who hopes in the valleys is a fool, a simpleton who should go back to school, to be taught that two and two never make five.

It is not drink, for the simple reason that drink has to be paid for.

It is chance.

The Goddess of Chance, whom the valleys worship, may occupy the shoddiest of shrines . . . the square of a crossword puzzle, the dotted lines of football-pool sheets, and the like . . . but she reigns supreme, none the less. She reigns, even though her disciples curse her, and call her foul names, more often than not. For does she not sometimes prove her power, in a shower of golden coins that fall down the chimney, that tinkle so loudly and clearly that all the valley marvels and renews its worship with redoubled ardour?

One of the saddest and most bitter sights I saw in the distressed areas was in a public library. There, hunched over magazines and newspapers were men with drawn faces, gnawing the stumps of pencils so hungrily that you would think they wanted to swallow them, as indeed they may have done. None of them spoke or moved. They stayed there, crouching, staring into space. Now and then, one of them would mumble, and then check himself, as though he had given away a secret. But for the most part they just stared, racking their brains (which were pitifully untrained for these tasks), in search of a word in four letters beginning with L. The word, most certainly, could not be Life.

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Here is the regular routine for a large section of these men . . . our brothers. On Friday they get their dole. It is the only day of the week on which they rise before noon. As soon as they get it, they hurry to the tobacconist for a packet of fags (to last them through the week), then to the post-office for a two shilling postal order. Clutching this in their hands, they run home, hand over the rest of the money to the wife, and sit down over a football-pool coupon. I can never quite understand what these football-pool competitions are . . . they always seem to me more complicated than the higher mathematics . . . but as far as one can see they are the sole intellectual exercise, and the only gleam of hope from the outer world, of thousands of men in the valleys.

### VII

Sit with me in the Labour Club at Penygraig.

The Labour Club is a gaunt, ugly building that looks on to a narrow street. Immediately opposite is the remains of what was once a post-office, but to-day is an empty shell.

Over the doorway of the club hangs a picture of Keir Hardie, and one or two faded cricket groups, of happier days. In the main room, a few men are drinking beer. They sip it very slowly, as though it was the last they would ever get.

Listen to Mr. Mainwaring, the miner's M.P. He sits down beside me with his beer, pushes his hat back, and thumps the table with his fist.

Mr. Mainwaring is in a bad temper, and I don't blame him. For he has just returned from a meeting which, in his

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humble opinion — (he uses the word ‘humble’ with considerable irony) — shows that the special commissioners of H.M. Government have not even begun to grasp the problem of the valleys.

‘Here are some things you can tell people,’ says Mr. Mainwaring, clenching his fists.

‘You can tell them that we don’t want any more public-schoolboys coming down here to teach us how to employ our leisure. We don’t want leisure. We want work.’

‘You can tell them that there’s no solution to the problem by just “increasing production”. Even at the present rate of production the mines will be exhausted in fifty years. If you speed up you’ll only bring the day of reckoning closer.

‘You can tell them that there is *no* alternative employment down here. No factories. No industries of any sort. And none are being started.

‘You can tell them that we have the sites, we have the men, we have the markets. And we have the will.’

All too tragically true, Mr. Mainwaring. But how long, I wonder, will the men of South Wales even have the will, if this rot is allowed to continue?



## CHAPTER XVII

### BLACK DIAMONDS

#### I

'SOMETHING must be done,' said King Edward VIII, at the conclusion of his brief tour of the distressed areas.

It was not a very profound statement, but it caught the popular imagination.

Whether Edward would ever have been able to implement his words must remain a matter of conjecture. However, they still echo in and out of the valleys. People still recall them, wonder if they meant anything; wonder, most of all, if something *is* ever going to be done.

There are beginnings. Let us admit that. Relief expeditions are formed, as though to some remote island. And then, a school springs up, or a club, or a camp. The brightness of these little places is deeply affecting. They are like flowers on a slag-heap.

Let us walk to the nursery of Ynyscynon, which has the special blessing of the Board of Education. I believe that is the right way to spell it, though a few y's more or less would not make much difference.

This nursery is built on an ancient coal-tip. Not a very healthy place, you might think. But it is not as bad as it sounds, for nature, the universal healer, covers even these immense rubbish heaps of slag with green grass, as the years

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roll by, and since Ynyscynon is fairly high up it is out of the worst of it.

A little lower down it is a different matter. As we approach the nursery we see a coal-black stream meandering through banks of mud. It has an unpleasant smell. I sniff, and look inquiringly at my companion.

'A lot of filth from the slaughter-houses pours into that stream,' she explains.

'It can't be very healthy.'

'Healthy? The children bathe in it, all the summer.'

I stare at the stream incredulously, to see if I had been maligning it. No. It is jet black. And it stinks.

'The children bathe in it,' I repeat, as though repetition made it easier to believe.

We pass on. A ragged man shuffled down the hill, trundling an odd sort of barrow made out of a packing-case and a bicycle wheel. In it three tin cans jangle together.

'What is *he* doing?' I ask.

'Selling paraffin oil.'

'To whom? And why?'

'To very poor people who cannot afford candles. They buy a pennyworth at a time. He makes quite a big profit.'

'I see.'

But I don't see, really. The ragged man doesn't seem real, somehow. He is like something out of a Rowlandson cartoon. He doesn't seem to fit in to Britain in 1938.

'What is that sheep doing there?'

(I apologize for these spasmodic questions. But such a lot of odd things seemed to be happening at once, as we climbed the hill.)

'Which sheep?'

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I pointed to it. A very dirty, thin sheep was poking its head through a front door, nosing at some potato-peelings in a bucket. I am not accustomed to sheep careering out of front doors in search of potato-peelings. Hence the question.

'Oh, it has just strolled down from the mountain, I suppose. Lots of them do. The grass is very poor, and they come down for what they can get from the dustbins. You will see plenty of them about, wandering in and out of the houses.'

I did. Somehow it seemed to add to the general unreality of the whole scene.

### II

The visit to this school was one of the most moving of all my experiences in the valley. For here one saw, for the first time, what life *might* be for the children, if only 'something were done'.

All little children are aristocrats . . . or should be. They all have the royal blood of innocence. They all have a natural grace, a debonair assurance . . . or should have. It is only acute poverty that turns them into the shivering, haunted little things that one sees in the streets.

In this school the children go back to childhood, and in going back, they regain the aristocracy which they have lost. You may think that children of two to seven could never have left childhood. You would be wrong. At home they are just undeveloped adults. They are not children.

Here, as soon as a child enters the school, he is given a symbol which he carries with him till he leaves. For instance,

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a boy may be a lion, a girl may be a butterfly. Everything the boy owns or uses has the lion stamp, the little towel with which he dries his face in the bathroom, the mug from which he drinks his milk, the spoon he must use for his porridge. In this way, very tiny children, after a few weeks, learn orderly habits which they could never learn if they merely thought in terms of names and numbers.

That is one small example of the creative imagination which animates the conduct of this school. Another is to be observed in what I can only call 'the suggestion of soap'. Many of the children come from homes where cleanliness is associated only with necessity . . . they hear their father cursing as he washes off the worst filth, they hear their mother groaning over the front door-step. But here, all over the walls, soap is sublimated. You see pictures of bright pink babies blowing bubbles in baths, of boys grinning over foaming washtubs, of girls stirring up the lather with such delight that you would think they were going to eat it.

What happens? The children run down the corridors. Pause, look up at these pictures with great staring eyes and suddenly decide that they too must have fun like that. As a result, it is a good deal easier to get a child into the bath-tub than out of it.

The whole school is run on lines like this. And as you pass through the rooms, and see the happy faces, and the eager little bodies, you are more than ever struck by the monstrous paradox that so many of the bodies should be in tattered clothes. You see the face of a boy that is like the face of a prince or a poet . . . he has hair of gold, immense violet eyes, a fine forehead, and hands that, even in their immaturity, suggest 'breeding'. And then you see the

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darns in his jersey, the threadbare patches in his coat. And you realize that when he leaves this school he will go back into the shadows, and be lost. The little prince will turn, day by day, into just another pauper.

However it isn't quite as bad as that. For, in the homes of the children who are being taught at this school, a gradual change is making itself felt. The children are teaching the parents. That is what is happening.

'The children are too clever for us now,' exclaim the parents. But there is pride rather than resentment in their voices.

Have you ever seen a baby's toothbrush? In all probability you have. It does not strike you as strange . . . this absurdly small object that looks as if it came out of a doll's house.

But it struck the babies' mothers as exceedingly strange. What *was* it? A toothbrush? And must baby use it every day? *Three* times a day? And ought I to get one too?

Within a little while after the founding of the school the mothers were going into Woolworth's to buy sixpenny toothbrushes for themselves. Their babies had told them to.

Their babies also told them that they should spread a cloth on the dinner-table. Again, at first, it seemed the strangest idea to the mothers. Who ever heard of a cloth on the dinner-table? Why, baby might spill things on it. But then they found that baby didn't spill things any more. He had been taught better at school. And he missed the cloth, and banged his spoon on the bare table. So the mothers went out, and got little cheap cotton table-cloths, with bright blue and red checks on them. Somehow, it seemed to cheer things up at meal-times.

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### III

I did not wish to write the section that follows. It does not make pretty reading, by any means.

But I felt impelled to write it, not only because the average reader does not realize that such sights can be witnessed in 'prosperous' Britain, in 1938, but also because the scene itself took place in the home of a child who was at school at Ynyscynon.

It is to homes like these that the children must return, after their few hours of sunshine in the school.

To homes like these, where in one room, before their eyes, all the tragedies of birth and of life are enacted, with no attempt at privacy, nor indeed, any possibility of it. And not only the tragedies of life, but the final tragedy of death.

An hour after I had left Ynyscynon, I stood by the death-bed of John Morgan, an ex-miner.

His small son is on his way home from school. In a few moments he will join the group round the bedside, this boy of five. It is intolerable that a child should witness such agony. Still more intolerable when you are told that he has been forced not only to witness it, but to hear it, for a period of six weeks, day and night. For John Morgan is taking a long time to die. But this time he is dying in earnest, in such torture that his groans seem to tear your own heart. For he has cancer of the lungs, tuberculosis, and double pneumonia, and a man does not breathe easily in that state, even if he is strong and tries to be brave.

He is dying by the open window. All the street can see him, for the window-curtains have long ago been pawned.

## BLACK DIAMONDS

Round the bedside stand eight people. It is a tiny room with a low, dirty ceiling, but it is the only sitting-room which the family possess. There are two boxes of bedrooms upstairs. One box sleeps five, and the other three.

The light is failing, and John Morgan is failing too. The pain is almost past bearing. 'Oh God, Oh God!' he cries. The whole room is permeated with pain. We stand and look at each other. Our lips move in prayer.

An old woman bends over him and wipes the sweat from his forehead with a clean rag. His face twists to a smile, a smile so grotesque, so tortured, that I dare not look at it. It goes as soon as it came. There are only these slow, rattling breaths, that come from the very depths of pain, each breath, a sword of pain, slashing his quivering body.

A little ragged boy runs into the room. He is David, home from school. He takes a glance at his father, then he notices me. He whispers to his brother, asking who I am. The brother shakes his head. He does not know. The little boy throws his satchel into the corner, folds his arms, and stares at me. I notice that he keeps on blinking nervously, and that his shoulders twitch. It is almost as though he had been shell-shocked.

Well, it is not surprising that he is, shall we say 'nervous'. For six weeks this has been going on. Yes, John Morgan has taken all that time to die.

He has taken all that time to die, in the presence of his children, and his wife, and her mother. They have lived, night and day, to the rhythm of his pain. The little boys and girls have started up in the night, clutching each other, staring at each other in the dark, while from the room below comes that hideous throaty noise. Like an animal

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screaming. But an animal that screams: 'My God . . . my God.'

'Do not worry. It was not as bad for them as it would be for us.'

Actually, a man said to me, long afterwards. He said it in the outer world, when John Morgan was dead and buried, far away, in the cheap coffin for which his wife had collected, going from door to door, seeking sixpences in the rain.

'No,' he said, 'it would not be nearly as bad for them as for "us".'

By which he meant that those figures, standing there in the fading light by the side of the man they loved, were only dummy figures. Puppets of poverty. He meant that poverty had robbed them of real feelings, dulled their senses, anaesthetized their nerves.

I wonder. I should have thought that poverty sharpened the nerves. Made pain more exquisite and pleasure more acute.

For look at the boy standing by the doorway. He is the second son. He is a fair-haired slip of a youth, just eighteen. Had he been born in a different bedroom, he would now be getting ready to go to Oxford. He would be exceptionally attractive, and he would be aware of the fact. He would consider that life had grossly thwarted him if he were not given a sports car, and an adequate wardrobe, and quantities of charming clothes. And of course, adoration.

But here . . . his opposite number, leaning against the doorway with his cap over his eyes . . . what of him? Well, first of all, he is a father. And the little girl by his side, with the peaked face, and the plucked eyebrows and the grimy forehead, is his wife. Also aged eighteen. They married

## BLACK DIAMONDS

on the dole. And the bundle that she clutches in her arms is the result.

Does the fact that you are a father at eighteen 'dull the nerves?' Does the fact that you have listened to the cries of your child, at an age when your own childhood is still a vivid memory, make you 'callous'? Does the fact that your youth has been stunted and starved make you impervious to pain?

The obvious thing to write would be 'I wonder.' But I don't wonder. I know. I know that this suggestion is a living lie. A lie of the comfortable against the poor.

Poverty doesn't dull the senses. It enhances them.

I wish that any man who might question that statement could have stood with me by the bedside of John Morgan, while he was dying. He would have seen the answer, written plainly on the faces around him.

He would have seen it in the twitching eyes of that little boy home from school. In the strange, frozen frown of the girl-wife's plucked eyebrows. In the mad, resentful twist of the old woman's mouth, as she whispered words of broken comfort to the dying man. In the blank mask of the mother's face, a mask that switched this way and that, in the dusk, like something pulled by wires.

John Morgan died at eight o'clock that night. The street-lamp shone straight down on his face, so that all the passers-by could see. You may remember, the curtains had been pawned.

And the family were very quiet about it. They said very little. There was just the drawing of a sheet, and a few harsh, ugly sobs from a woman by the fire.



## C H A P T E R   X V I I I

### D O W N   T H E   M I N E

#### I

ONE question remained unanswered. I tried to answer it before leaving the distressed areas.

I wanted to know the secret of what can only be called the 'nostalgia of the mine'. It is a sort of homesickness which seizes the Welsh miner, even when he has left the district, and obtained remunerative employment elsewhere. It is so strong that in far more cases than are generally recorded it will cause a man to chuck up his job, to come home, and to hang about the pit-head on the chance of a few odd days in the pit.

Why? It baffled me. Coal-mining surely was dirty, unhealthy, dangerous, and underpaid. Yet 'once a miner, always a miner'. What was the secret, hidden down below?

The only way to find out, presumably, was to go down and investigate for myself. So on the following day I found myself pulling on a grimy pair of overalls at the pit-head, sticking on an old cap, grabbing a safety lamp, and following my guide into the lift.

Certainly the first few moments gave no clue to the mystery of the fascination. We stood in a rattling, black cage, open at the sides. We grabbed a steel bar. A signal was given, and down we shot . . . down, down, dropping like a stone,

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with the air growing warmer, and a mist of coal dust whirling into our eyes.

'Out we get.'

I stepped out. Before us stretched a tunnel, dimly lit. A few black figures were moving, here and there.

As we began to walk, I noticed how quiet it all was. Hushed, as though the mine held a great secret. Our feet sank into the piled dust, as into a thick carpet. And there were strange winds that blew down the tunnels, winds that brought with them a smell that was entirely new, faint but persistent, the smell of coal-dust, and sweat, and ancient poison, and of . . . well, the only word that suggests itself is 'deepness'. A smell that had nothing whatever to do with the outer world.

But mostly it was the *quiet* that affected me, these first few minutes. We passed men who appeared only as a pair of bloodshot eyes and a row of white teeth, standing against the wall, and when they spoke their voices were flat and seemed to come from a great distance.

We trudged on. The guide went in front and the light from his lantern cast weird beams over the roof and floor.

Suddenly, I started. A train seemed to be approaching. It came nearer and nearer, but I could not see it. Involuntarily, I pressed back against the wall. What was happening? It must be upon us now, roaring, steaming, only a few yards away. But it was invisible!

Then, I realized what was happening. The train was *overhead*, in the tunnel above. It roared past, and soon was only an echo in the distance.

'That's what we call the ghost train,' said the guide, with a grin.

## DOWN THE MINE

And I thought, as we went along, how very apt this expression was. For the whole mine made me think of those mystery houses that are found on pleasure-beaches. You pay sixpence and shuffle down dark corridors where the ground gives way under your feet, and eerie lights flash in your eyes and mysterious hands grip you by the throat. Yes, a coal-mine is very like that. Only more so.

### II

We had not been going long before one mystery of the mines was solved for me.

I should explain that all down these narrow tunnels are tram-tracks. The 'trams' are really large open wagons, hooked together. They are loaded with coal at the coal-face and then sent hurtling back on their journey to the pit-head. They are extremely heavy, and when they rush by, you are thankful for the man-holes in the walls which enable you to spring out of the way.

I had constantly read in the papers of accidents where men had been crushed to death, or horribly mangled by these trams. And I could not understand why. After all, in these tunnels you can see a long way ahead. You can hear these things rushing towards you, even if you aren't looking out for them. Since there was a regular series of man-holes at every few yards (by man-hole I mean a sort of niche in the wall), why was it that accidents occurred?

There is a strange answer, but it is a true one. The explanation is that as you walk down those tunnels, something curious happens to you. You begin to dream. You are

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partially hypnotized . . . by the dust, the darkness, and the depth. Even I, who had my ears open, and who was concentrating a trained observation on every detail which might prove of interest, found myself wandering along in a sort of dream, as though there were an anaesthetic in the air.

I was glad, therefore, when the guide paused, looked back and called out, 'Like to see the ponies?'

I nodded. We went up a little passage. There were six or seven stalls. In each was a pony. They were a good deal larger than I had thought they would be, and they looked plump, healthy and contented.

All the same, as I ran my hand down the neck of one of those ponies, and felt the warm smooth skin, and listened to the absurd, affectionate snuffling which he made, I would have given anything to lead him outside, up into the fresh air, where he could roll in the green grass.

'They aren't blind, you know,' said my guide. 'They're dazzled when they come up, naturally. But their eyes are perfectly good.'

I felt something warm brush against my leg. I looked down and saw a little white cat. I lifted it up. It had a purr like an open exhaust and it did all the best cat things . . . dabbing at my chin with a paw, jumping on my shoulder and pushing a cold wet nose violently into my ear, clawing with great determination (still purring) when I lifted it down, and then walking away with the utmost disdain.

It was a snow-white cat, by the way. It must have put in a good deal of overtime in the laundry, to keep so clean in this atmosphere.

It was here, by the way, coming out of the stables, that I first saw white cockroaches.

## DOWN THE MINE

Cockroaches have never been my favourite form of domestic pet. There is something sinister about them, and he who crunches a cockroach has a terrible feeling of breaking bones, of murdering something foul but very much alive and sentient.

But if ordinary black cockroaches are sinister, white cockroaches are far more so. There is something unspeakably evil about them. They have the unhealthy pallor of fungi in dark woods, those fungi that you feel the sun has never touched, not because it cannot reach them, but because even sunlight would be poisoned if it were to come into contact with that damp and evil flesh.

And here were the white cockroaches crawling round my ankle, getting very near to the gap between my socks and my overalls. I bent down and brushed them off. As I did so I felt slightly sick.

### III

No sign of the mysterious fascination yet, you may observe. And when are we going to get to the coal?

It was what I was asking myself. We had crawled through arches where special blankets were hung to regulate the ventilation. Jumped on to escalators carrying coal back to the pit-head. Turned corner after corner. But still no sign of the coal itself.

It made one realize that even when he is in the mine, a man has a long way to go before he can begin to make any money. A long way and a hard way too.

For as the road plunged down, I noticed that the girders

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which arched the roof, began to be bent by the immense, unceasing pressure above them. A little farther back they had been perfectly regular. But here some of them looked as though a giant had taken them and bent them across his knee. In some cases they had gone so far that we had to bend down in order to avoid knocking the sagging roof with our heads.

‘Aren’t these dangerous?’

No. My guide assured me that they were not. And since this is one of the best regulated mines in the area, I took his word for it. All the same it is a reminder of the constant risks in which these men work.

Unless we speed things up we shall never get there. So imagine more tunnels, deeper and deeper, narrower and narrower, an increasing racket of noise, and at last we turn a corner, and are face to face with the coal itself.

### I V

It is impossible to look, for the first time, at this small black square, glistening in the artificial light, without a feeling of deep emotion. Here, on this foundation, an Empire has been built. From here has come the power which has sent great ships over the seven seas, has levelled mountains, spanned rivers, created life in deserts. All from this small black square. And now, the square is near its end. A few more years and the last of it will be shovelled into the trams and will rattle its way to the pit-head. And then the great tunnels will be deserted, and the lights will flicker out, and

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the pit will be closed and the black rats and the white cock-roaches will reign supreme.

However that day is not yet. There is fierce activity on the right, which is the coal-face proper. In order to get to it, we have to crawl on hands and knees.

This, as far as I was concerned, was the most unpleasant part of the whole business. Even if you suffer from claustrophobia you can keep it in check as long as you are able to stand up. But to leave even the tunnels behind, and to crawl into what was only a glorified drain-pipe, with only a few props keeping an entire Welsh hill from crashing down on your head . . . (for that is how it seemed) . . . was not my idea of fun.

We crawled about ten yards, past men like negroes, crouching, lying on their backs. And then we crawled back again.

Now, in case this has all meant nothing to you (as most descriptions of mines, in the past, have meant nothing to me), would you mind pausing a moment, in order to make a simple physical experiment? Would you mind getting out of your chair, kneeling down on one knee, so that your chin almost touches your knee? Would you then, please, try to imagine that if you lift your head even a few inches it will hit a roof which is nearly half a mile thick? And then, still further, think of yourself as holding in your hand a heavy pick, with which you have to split lumps from the coal-face?

It might become a little boring, don't you think, to hold this position for long, even by your own fire-side? But imagine holding it day in and day out, in an atmosphere so thick with dust that your lungs are caked with it, in semi-darkness

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to the sound of a pandemonium of picks, shovels, loaded belts of coal, and rattling trams.

Always, remember, with the knowledge that it is a half-hour's walk to the entrance and that all along the tunnels through which you must pass on your way back, there lurks danger . . . danger of leaking gases, of subsidence, of runaway trams . . . danger in a thousand forms.

If you can carry out this little exercise, in the spirit as well as in the letter, I do not think you will be inclined to suggest that £2 8s. a week is an extravagant wage for such a life.

## CHAPTER XIX

### INTERLUDE AT LINCOLN

#### I

AFTER a visit to Wales any man who cares for his country . . . any man, indeed, who is not quite indifferent to the sufferings of his fellow-men . . . is bound to try to 'do something about it'.

The point is . . . what can he do?

I myself, for some time, did a number of futile things. I tried to get people jobs. I experimented with the idea of yet another club. I wrote fierce articles and gave away a certain amount of money. It was all pretty useless.

Then I thought to myself, 'It might be better to try to learn a little more. To see if, among all the litter of cures for unemployment with which this country is scattered, there might not be something, somewhere, somehow, which would give me a clue to work upon. It might come in a quite unexpected way. From a few lines in a letter from a man on the dole. From a few paragraphs in a book which the reviewers had neglected. From a chance contact with some obscure local official. Even from my own head.'

After all, one had been given to understand that the inspiration which caused Stevenson to invent the steam engine came to him in an idle moment when he was watching a kettle boiling on the hearth. Might not some equally

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trivial clue provide me with the inspiration to invent a cure for unemployment?

It was all very naive and childish, no doubt. But after Wales, one feels so strongly that one doesn't care about making oneself look a fool. And so I read, with especial assiduity, every letter, book, pamphlet and circular which bore on this question. As a working journalist I had a wide choice. I receive an average of thirty letters from Social Credit fans, every week. I am the particular target of the gentlemen who attribute the world's unrest to an incomplete understanding of the Tribes of Israel, how, where and when they were lost, and how, where and when they will be rediscovered. I am not neglected by the exponents of 'orthodox' finance, the champions of arty-crafty — back-to-spinning-wheel philosophy, and the old-fashioned Manchester school (which still, odd as it may seem, flourishes in this country). I even have letters, neatly typed, from anarchists in Russell Square. So there was no lack of material from which to choose.

It would take too long to explain how, at last, I heard about the Lincoln experiment. It seemed to me to be at once something very new and something very old. It seemed as new as this morning's paper and as old as Christianity itself.

And so, I went to Lincoln. I was not very sanguine. I had seen too many unemployment 'schemes', in practice, to have any high hopes. Had I not sat in the window of an apartment looking out over Central Park, New York, and watched fifteen men move the same small tree to seven different places, over a period of two weeks? The tree did not need to be moved at all. It was perfectly all right where it was. Even if it had to be moved, one man could have dug it up and

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transplanted it in half an hour. As it was, fifteen men took two weeks to do it, at the end of which period the tree gave up the ghost and died. A very pretty example of what happens when governments start to 'make' work.

All the same, Lincoln seemed to be worth a visit. It did not seem so for very long.

Perhaps it was the horse's fault.

### II

It was a wooden horse, and it stared at me with reproachful eyes.

A wizened little man poked it in the back. It rocked backwards and forwards, still staring. After five or six rockings, it came to rest.

'They're very popular with the kiddies,' said the wizened little man.

'Yes. I'm sure they are.'

'We've made nearly fifty for Christmas.'

I nodded.

I wanted to go away and curse somebody. The old sense of futility had suddenly returned.

It was all wrong to feel like this, of course. For the principle behind the scheme, which I will soon explain in greater detail, was 'service for others'. The bold spirits of Lincoln had actually dared to try to put Christianity into practice in order to cure unemployment. I still believe that they are nearer to a solution than anybody else.

In spite of that, when I saw that horse, I shuddered.

The barn-like room was cold.

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I took an opportunity to stroll away.

We were in a big recreation room in the deserted part of a factory. It had been kindly lent, by the owners, to the People's Service Club, which arose out of the Workers' Educational Association. The W.E.A., as we shall call this association, is a magnificent organization which deserves our deep respect. So are the Service Clubs. I believe that they may prove, in the end, to offer the only solution to unemployment which we are likely to see in this country.

But I had to record that passing mood of desolation, of hopelessness. It is probably familiar to all those who have ever done any social work.

All the morning I had been wandering round workshops where unemployed men had been working . . . for nothing. I had seen them repairing children's boots, for nothing. Making bed-rests for invalids, little wooden cupboards, chairs, tables, for nothing. I had seen these men, who normally would have been lounging on a bench or lying in bed till noon, working happily, feeling that they were being of service to mankind. I had seen a holiday house that they erected, on a piece of land which some kind woman had lent them. It was all splendid.

And yet . . . that damnable *frisson* shook me when the old man showed me the rocking-horse. I suddenly felt that all this work was unreal. It was like trying to entertain grown men with games for children. I found myself asking what will happen when every child has a rocking-horse, when every invalid has a bed-rest, when every woman has all the tables and chairs she wants. What then?

I stared up at a row of photographs on the wall. Each photograph showed a nice old man sitting in a chair. And

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underneath each picture was printed a label, informing the world that in return for fifty years' faithful service in this factory (in one of whose deserted rooms we were now standing), Mr. X had been presented with a gold medal and an arm-chair.

Fifty years! And at the end of it, a gold medal and an arm-chair. It is more than many employers do for their workmen. But somehow, it does not seem . . . shall we say? . . . too much!

III

In some ways it might have been better not to have published the first part of this chapter, for it may seem to spread an air of futility over what follows. However we will let it stand. It will be fairly clear, before we have finished, that there is nothing futile about the Lincoln experiment.

This experiment, (of which some knowledge is essential to any social historian of modern England), arose out of the discovery that pioneer educational work among the unemployed was quite useless. To quote the present Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, who has been one of the keenest workers in the Lincoln experiment: '*Unemployment made men so listless and hopeless that they could take no interest in any kind of study. What weighed most on these men's minds was that they had no status or function in the community. They had lost very often their Trade Union connection, the ordinary social intercourse which a common job implies, the consciousness of doing something respected in the community. They had the sense of hopelessness in gradually losing their chance of getting back to work as their hands got soft. No one wanted them; they felt themselves regarded as nuisances.*

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*The whole situation was summed up in the terrible phrase that "they felt like ghosts."<sup>1</sup>*

"They felt like ghosts!" It is indeed a tragic phrase, and a grim reflection on this Age of Leisure, which has been the dream of philosophers throughout the centuries, only to prove a nightmare in the end. But ghosts, when they are able-bodied ghosts, haunting the Labour exchanges, can be not only tragic but troublesome. For there comes a time when they cease from wailing and weeping, and begin to break things up. They were beginning to break things up in Lincoln. And that brings us to one of the most fascinating stories in the whole experiment. I feel it ought to be printed like this. . . .

*The Lincoln Gang  
And how it was  
Outwitted  
Outgangstered  
and finally  
Converted  
by an  
Oxford Lady  
who was an  
Authority  
on  
Modern European Thought.*

It is the sort of thing that could only happen in England. It is, to me, a fascinating story, but even if you find it dull, it is worth making an effort to read it, for three reasons.

<sup>1</sup> Unemployment and Education. The Metcalf Memorial Lecture by A. D. Lindsay, Master of Balliol. Sedgwick & Jackson, Ltd.

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Firstly because these gangs are springing up all over Britain. If you consider this an alarmist statement, it is only a proof of the efficiency of the British press in keeping such unpleasant things out of the papers.

Secondly because the rise of this gang affords a classic example of the effect of the slow poison of unemployment working on minds and bodies which were otherwise clean and healthy.

Thirdly because its decline was brought about not only by improved industrial conditions, (which might, after all, have afforded an opportunity for reaping richer rewards from crime), but by non-police methods which, in their understanding of the psychology of youth, showed an intuition that amounted to genius.

It was the summer of 1933. For over three years a large number of the factories of Lincoln had been idle. Of course prosperity, according to the politicians, was 'just around the street corner', but if you had to stand all day around the street corner yourself, year in and year out, longing for anything to do with your hands, your feet or your head, there was not much comfort to be gained from the phrases of politicians.

So, at least, thought a number of young men in Lincoln (which, we must remind you, was neither better nor worse than a thousand other towns). And having thought so, they looked round for something to destroy.

They fixed their eyes on the workshop of the People's Service Club.

It might be thought that if ever there were an institution that was safe from the malevolent attentions of a gang of unemployed, the People's Service Club would be that

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institution. It had been established for their benefit. It was being conducted, with selfless devotion, by persons whose sole idea was to help. Moreover, it was a success.

But these youths were suffering . . . as tens of thousands of their fellows all over the world are suffering . . . from a revenge-upon-society complex. And so they banded themselves together under a Leader, (a young man of great intelligence), and began to make themselves objectionable. Insinuating themselves into the Club, (in which, of course, they were welcomed in the same spirit as all the other unemployed) they proceeded to the following acts of violence . . .

### *Destruction.*

They broke all windows.

Sabotaged the machinery.

'Blew out' the electric dynamo.

Sawed through legs of chairs and other furniture.

Slit up sacks and curtains etc.

### *Theft.*

They stole tools, wood, nails, paint, anything else of value they could lay hands on, and invented swindling methods of obtaining more than their share of anything which the Club shared out to its members.

### *Personal Annoyance.*

They threw nails at the older members working at the bench, and threw large files past the face of the superintendent. They used every insult and ingenious nastiness to annoy the superintendent, and the senior members. They wrote up obscene phrases on the walls and shouted them at young women passing the work-shops on their way to business.

And this is the cue for the entrance of the young lady from

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Oxford, Miss Alice Cameron, M.A., Lecturer on Modern European Thought, Sociology, International Relations and other subjects which, one imagines, are not ideally suited as a preparation for dealing with gangs of roughs.

### I V

Miss Cameron had been at Lincoln for some years. She had a distinguished educational career at Oxford, and from her very agreeable appearance one would guess that this is not the only sphere in which she might have shone. She preferred to bury herself at Lincoln, working for the people. And as long as there are women of her calibre in our country, the dangers of revolution are comparatively remote.

When things began to get unbearable, and when it was evident that these acts of petty destruction and annoyance might well lead, before long, to acts of serious crime, Miss Cameron decided to act.

She acted in a totally unexpected way.

Instead of telephoning for the police and having the gang expelled, either to prison, or to their old positions at the street corner, she tackled them in person, single-handed. She called them together and said: 'So you're a gang are you? All right, agreed. Only, if you're a gang, you've at least got to be loyal to your boss.' If she did not actually add 'get me, kids?' in so many words, the expression was at least implicit.

It is distinctly amusing to compare Miss Cameron's actual methods with the demure paraphrase of them as

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recorded in a paper which she has kindly lent me, entitled 'Paper on experiments with young unemployed men — aged 18—30 years'. In this discreet document, the above is described as follows: 'We decided to treat them as a gang, since there was a certain group loyalty observable in their organization, and if we had tried to break them up we should have aroused this loyalty against us, and complicated the position both psychologically and practically.'

The next steps taken by the indefatigable Miss Cameron were ethically deplorable but extremely effective. First she became a member of the gang herself, and secondly she had resort to bribery. At least, that is how it seems to me. True, in the aforesaid paper she airily denies that she bribed the gang, but as she offered them a free trip to London, within six weeks, on condition that they did not breathe a word of it to anyone else, the distinction seems to me a little obscure. It was this offer which got her into the gang, or, as she more delicately puts it, 'gave me a place in their counsels, of which I made use to fraternize with them'.

She certainly did. The situation is bizarre . . . almost incredible. But after some months of this fraternization, the thefts, the sabotage, and the obscenities noticeably diminished.

We now reach the second stage. Miss Cameron shall tell it in her own words. And if you read between the lines, it becomes a good deal more dramatic than the somewhat sober phrasing would suggest.

'Second Stage. In order to appeal to and rouse their gang loyalty, and to give expression to their desire to impress the community (which was, I believed, one of the motives leading to destruction), I suggested that they should demand

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better playgrounds for the children of the city. I also suggested that if the Council would provide these playgrounds, they should make swings, see-saws, and other equipment, and present it to the city. This somewhat high-handed and lofty manner of treating the City Council was very attractive to them.'

I shall perhaps be pardoned if I suggest that it was probably very attractive to Miss Cameron too. At all events, things worked like magic. They got the press interested, and they were received by the Mayor.

It would be too long a story to tell how the gang was eventually mastered, and its members turned into respectable and useful members of the community. There were many set-backs of course. You cannot repair the moral ravages of years of unemployment in a few weeks. The Leader deserted, was coaxed back again. Tools continued to disappear, and were returned not through threats, but through a growing realization that it was not 'the thing' to let Miss Cameron down. Her work might really be described as a gradual cultivation, in the gang, of that much-abused quality which, in other circles, is described as 'the public-school spirit'. And it was done by almost super-human patience, by brilliant intuition, and by a constant concentration on work of public benefit.

## v

So why the feeling of depression with which this chapter opened?

For a very simple reason. If unemployment is to be

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treated, on Lincoln lines, throughout the country, at least forty thousand Miss Camerons will be needed to organize it. And I do not believe there are forty thousand Miss Camerons. I do not even believe there are two.

Moreover, even if forty thousand Miss Camerons were available, what happens in the end? Miss Cameron's experiment ended in all her gang getting employment, not because she had transformed them, individually, but because the industrial boom set the factories of Lincoln working again. What happens when the depression comes back, as it is coming now?

More public works. And when the public works are finished?

These are frightening questions. It would be much pleasanter not to ask them. Most people don't. And even those who do seldom give an honest answer.

We have become accustomed, in the proud democracies of England and America, to immense unemployment figures. If, in England, the impossible were to happen, and those figures were to descend to within the neighbourhood of a million, a shout of joy would go up from the whole country. Just think of it . . . only a *million* able-bodied fellow citizens condemned to stand at the street-corner for the rest of their lives! A paltry *million* eager, willing, intelligent adults . . . a mere *million* sentenced to slow death by desuetude! Were such a miracle ever to occur, were the ranks of the unemployed ever to be reduced to this flea-bite of a mere million, it would indeed be a day for rejoicing. The bells of Saint Paul's would, it is hoped, be pealed in honour of the event, and the King's speech would be full of pompous phrases in its celebration.

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But no such happy prospect awaits us. Rather are we faced, if we would only be honest, if we would only have the courage to look to the end of the decade instead of to the end of the stock exchange account . . . we are faced with the prospect of at least two, and possibly five, million unemployed. And if we go farther still, and use a really good economic telescope, we may realize, with a shock, that on the horizon of unwritten history, there is gathering an even greater army, an army which, from this point of view, approaches dangerously near the ten million mark.

Perhaps the reason for the depression with which this chapter began may now be a little more apparent. For the question really boils down to this . . . '*For how long a period can you keep how large a number of men employed in making how many crates of rocking-horses for how many poor children?*'

And when every poor child has a rocking-horse, and every poor old woman has a hand-painted water-bottle, and when every poor old man has a hand-carved pipe-rack, what then?

In other words, when the swiftly-swelling crowd of men who are being given things to tinker with in the courtyard, to distract their attention from the noise of the factory inside . . . when there are no more things for them to tinker with, what happens?

You may say that I have chosen petty examples, that there will *always* be work to do in the world, for all its teeming millions.

Yes? Let me give you a little example of the reason why I think such a supposition to be criminally optimistic.

At a recent international fair, there was a Robot. Quite a nice Robot. Clean, glistening, amiable of expression.

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A very willing Robot too. For if you put five cents into his stomach, he spoke. He gave orders to another Robot, who was sitting in an angular position on a plough not far away.

As soon as this Robot received his orders, a metal arm was extended, various wheels began to revolve, and the plough began to plough. Naturally it did not plough very far, for five cents, but the fact that it had ploughed at all provided you with a very useful object lesson in the present-day mechanization of industry.

Now it has been calculated, not by freaks, but by sober men of business, that if the fields of the United States of America were planned according to a standard pattern and if a sufficient number of Robot ploughs were provided by a paternal administration, one man, pressing one button in Washington, could set in motion machinery that would plough two-thirds of the acreage of the American Continent.

Needless to say, it would need a considerable amount of preliminary organization. And needless to say, the idea, at the moment, sounds like one of the more fiercely adolescent dreams of Mr. H. G. Wells. At the same time . . . is there *any* answer to the question: 'How can you stop the advance of the machine?'

One day, the last swamp will be drained, the last road built. One day the final ornament will be laid on the final tower, whether it be a tower to a hall of 'leisure' or a tower to a house of industry. One day there will be no new lands to conquer, no fresh fields to plough. One day the last dust of the last slum will have blown away, and will be remembered only as the hues of some sunset, on some horizon soon forgotten.

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And then, what will happen, in this land of the future? What sounds will break the silence, except the steady beating of the machines? The tap, tap, tap, of millions of men, carving wooden ornaments that nobody wants? The scream of scales ascending and descending, executed by musicians who will have nobody to whom to play?

### VI

I have gone to the pains of reading Karl Marx . . . an exercise which many of his most passionate adherents appear to have excused themselves. I have a fairly adequate comprehension of the theories of Social Credit . . . theories which on paper are incontrovertible and in practice have proved to be untranslatable. I am naturally aware of the principal variations on the capitalist theme, starting at one end with the sober economic counterpoint of Mr. McKenna and ending, at the other, with the disturbing discords and bewildering cadenzas of Mr. Roosevelt. I have even been to the pains of examining quite a large number of other, less advertised, economic schemes and panaceas. They fall thickly into the letter box of any writer who, as I do, not only answers questions but asks them.

And I remain where I was at the beginning. I see no solution. I echo the words of that charming, if erratic, politician, Mr. J. H. Thomas, who once said: to me 'I've talked to every economic expert in the world. I've asked them question after question, and I've come to the conclusion that none of the damned' — (the word begins with B) — 'knows a thing about it.'

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It is the same with me. ‘Myself when young did eagerly frequent, doctor and saint, and heard great argument, about it and about, but evermore, came out by that same door as in I went.’ Came out into nothingness. Into emptiness and desolation.

## CHAPTER XX

### UNKNOWN QUANTITY

#### I

It is fairly inevitable that any reader who has had the energy to accompany the author so far, on his melancholy progress through the land, will accuse him of what are vaguely called 'Fascist tendencies'.

Such accusations are very common in modern England, and are levelled with singular levity at a remarkable diversity of persons. Those who hold sane views on the German Colonial situation, for example, are instantly labelled 'Fascists'. So are those who doubt the durability of the French popular front, or those who refuse to regard the government of Madrid as an angelic assembly. So are those who, while realizing that there is a very good case for the nationalization of the major industries, also realize that there is a very good case against it.

I myself was first accused of Fascist sympathies when I wrote, apropos of the late Lady Houston, that I preferred her politics to those of Miss Ellen Wilkinson, because Lady Houston at least made me laugh, while Miss Ellen Wilkinson only made me want to weep.

Since the word 'Fascist' is, perhaps, the favourite term of abuse among the more advanced circles of British thought, we shall not waste our time if we ask ourselves what it means, at any rate as far as Britain is concerned.

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Very few people who are loudest in their abuse of British Fascism have ever read a single speech by its leader, Sir Oswald Mosley. Very many of those who are most urgent in proclaiming its menaces are ignorant of its philosophy, which differs widely from the continental variety.

However, before we examine the nature of this 'menace' against which we are asked to defend ourselves, we might well ask ourselves exactly what those liberties really are and if they are so worthy of defence.

### I I

The liberty of the press, as we have seen before, is a liberty which, to put it mildly, is partial, and in many cases is wholly dependent on the whims of the advertisers. This will be so evident, when we examine the history of British Fascism that we will not here enlarge upon it.

What of the liberty of literature, which we prize so highly? Is it quite so firmly established as we like to imagine?

We are shocked, and rightly shocked, when a mob of Nazi hooligans make a bonfire of the finest literature in Berlin, and dance round it screaming nonsense about 'race' and 'purity'. It is true that this episode took place in the middle of a revolution, but that does not make it any the less reprehensible.

On the other hand, we do not seem to care tuppence when we do the same thing ourselves. Well . . . perhaps not quite the same thing. The authorities do not make bonfires of the books of which they disapprove. The flames of their burning might cast an unbecoming light on

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the face of British liberty. But they destroy them, none the less.

Of course I may be prejudiced. Although this example may sound trivial, I cannot forget that I have just been informed that a little novel I wrote, eight years ago, called *Crazy Pavements* has been publicly chucked out of one of our biggest municipal libraries as too indecent for circulation. Up till now, not one person had suggested that there was an indecent line in it. Nearly a hundred thousand copies had been sold, without a word of protest. And then, quite suddenly, this happens. Nor are the authorities content with that. They follow it up with correspondence in the local press in which the word 'filthy' is gaily flung in my face.

This sort of thing may not be as dramatic as a public burning, but it seems to me to be quite as irritating.

Most serious English authors could tell the same tale. Richard Aldington, for example, has stated that: 'Every single one of my novels has been more or less mutilated in the interests of prudery by my English publishers. I don't in the least blame them . . . they are only trying to guard themselves against the law.'

Aldous Huxley has had the humiliation of hearing a magistrate observe in court that certain passages from *Brave New World* were not fit to be read by decent people.

Bernard Shaw, Eden Philpotts, Laurence Housman, Rose Macaulay, Edward Garnett, Lascelles Abercrombie, John Buchan, Arnold Bennett, Lytton Strachey, Sheila Kaye-Smith and Laurence Binyon were among those who were prepared to give evidence in favour of the author in the amazing case of the banning of *The Well of Loneliness*.

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None of them were allowed to be called. The following extract from the case is interesting:

COUNSEL. I want to call evidence from every conceivable walk of life which bears on whether the tendency of this book was to deprave and corrupt. A more distinguished body of witnesses was never called in a court of justice.

The magistrate said he had the gravest doubt whether the evidence it was proposed to call was admissible.

COUNSEL. If I am not allowed to call the evidence it means that a magistrate is virtually a censor of literature.

MAGISTRATE. I don't think people are entitled to express what is merely an opinion upon a matter which is for the decision of the court.

This is British liberty and British justice. Is it so very far from the practices of that Fascism which we so monotonously condemn?

Are we, in fact, so very far from the bonfire mentality ourselves? If we had had ten million unemployed, a bankrupt treasury, and a broken, starving and degraded people (which was Hitler's heritage), and if we were faced with the alternative of opening the floodgates to Communism or putting a Fascist dam across the rapidly rising river of revolution ... might not we have danced round a bonfire or two?

I think it very probable that we might.

Even in the dignified atmosphere of the House of Lords, in peaceful 1934, one of our most distinguished bishops enlivened a debate on Lord Dawson's bill to restrict the sale of contraceptives by this astonishing observation: 'I would like to make a bonfire of them and dance round it.' My keen delight in visualizing the whirling gaiters of the

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bishop, lit by such dubious and pungent fires, is so great that I am incapable of treating his sentiments with the severity which they deserve.

This freedom on which we pride ourselves is largely a sham. A million men may not be forced, by the government, to wear the bright uniform of the state, but they *are* forced to wear the drab uniform of poverty. They may not be compelled to stand in a straight line on the parade ground, but they *are* compelled to stand in a ragged line outside the Labour Exchange. To talk about 'freedom' in a country where the doctrine of *laissez faire* has come to mean simple criminal negligence is as irritating as to talk about 'oppression' in a country where nine-tenths of the people heartily enjoy the 'oppression', and only ask for more.

By now, the suspicions of the reader concerning my 'Fascist tendencies' will doubtless be confirmed. I cannot help that. I am not a Fascist. I don't want to wear any shirt, black, brown, green, or red. But I do want to tell the truth as I see it. And it is so startling that I do not think you will be bored.

III

The first attempt to murder Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Fascists, was made at Hull, in July 1936. On this occasion a man in the crowd, who escaped, fired a bullet which penetrated the windscreen of his car.

This attempted murder is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, because political assassination is a rare phenomenon in British politics.

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Secondly, because it was entirely ignored by the press, of every shade of political opinion, except the Fascist. The only two papers which reported it were the two Black-shirt papers *Action* and *The Blackshirt*. Otherwise, not a paragraph.

Thirdly, because it was the culmination of a series of attacks on his person, which had begun as soon as he left the Labour party, in 1931, to lead the Fascist movement. As long as he was in the Labour camp, he was immune from attack.

A list of these attacks may cause us to revise our high opinion of our much-vaunted 'freedom of speech'.

Attacked with knives, razors, broken bottles, and life-preservers, after addressing a crowd of 15,000 people on Glasgow Green. Glasgow, September 1931.

His secretary knocked unconscious with a bottle, other members of his bodyguard seriously injured, his chauffeur knocked down and brutally kicked while unconscious. Birmingham, October 1931.

Attacked by a man with a knife, five of his bodyguard removed to hospital seriously injured. Bristol, March 1934.

Lead-piping, stones, broken bottles, among the missiles used against a bus occupied by Fascists. Four taken to hospital, one permanently blinded. Edinburgh, June 1934.

From 1934 onwards the violence has increased so rapidly that a recital of it would only be monotonous. The first attempt at murder, as we have seen, came in 1936 at Hull, but there were many other occasions when his life

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was in danger. Very few of these occasions were ever reported, though now and then a paragraph would creep in, paying a grudging tribute to his personal courage, while deplored his principles. For instance, the hostile *News Chronicle* reported, on September 28th, 1936: 'Sir Oswald was hit on the cheek, just below the right eye, with a stone. With blood streaming profusely from his wound he continued to march at the head of the procession.'

The fact that he was knocked unconscious from the roof of a car, the fact that a photographer got a sensational picture as he fell, and the fact that there was very little other 'hot news' on the day in question, gave a certain amount of publicity to the latest incident (October 1937). True, the thrower of the stone had no murderous intent . . . he was merely typical of many hot-blooded youths in the audience and he was quite rightly acquitted. Actually, he did Mosley a great service. For a few members of the public were forced to realize, with pained surprise, that though every facility was given, even in Hyde Park, to Communists who loudly and repeatedly preached bloody revolution, it was being rendered almost impossible, or at least deadly dangerous, for the chief opponent of the Communists to make his voice heard at all.

## IV

One does not need to be a Fascist to wish to see fair play done to even one's opponents. And the treatment of Sir Oswald Mosley, by the British press, makes one wonder if 'fair play' is an expression which, in these islands, is

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obsolete . . . if we had not better borrow a phrase from the German, which is still living and active . . . 'ehrliches Spiel'.

Or am I myself being unfair to the English character? Would it not be truer to say that this persistent suppression of the growth of British Fascism is due to the fact that the majority of Englishmen are, politically, sound asleep?

For one of the peculiarities of the British people is that, in opposition to Lincoln's famous principle, it *is* possible to fool all of the people *all* of the time. Or, which is nearly the same thing, at least 90 per cent of them.

This was evident . . . if you will excuse a moment's digression . . . in the abdication of King Edward VIII. For several years before the people of these islands woke up to find themselves in the midst of one of the gravest constitutional crises of their history, the men in Fleet Street were in full possession of the facts. I myself had a file of American press-cuttings, sent to me by obliging friends, in which every detail of the whole affair was set out, down to the design of the smallest piece of jewellery with which Mrs. Simpson had been presented. The whole world was buzzing with the 'romance'. But on the few occasions when I dared to drop a hint about it, to anybody who was not either a journalist, or in direct contact with the Royal Family, I was regarded with horror. How could anyone dare to repeat such fabrications about our beloved King?

To fool a nation so completely, over a period of years, in these days of international publicity, argues a willingness on the part of the nation to be fooled. The British believe what they like to believe, like the old lady in *Punch* who got off the bus at Hyde Park Corner. The conductor said to her,

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'Hi . . . I thought you wanted the Marble Arch? This is 'yde Park Corner.' 'It's what *I* call the Marble Arch,' said the old lady, stepping firmly on to the pavement.

It is therefore to be presumed that the British public do not wish even to recognize the existence of British Fascism . . . still less to learn any facts about it. And so, what I am about to say may give a large number of people an unpleasant shock. Still, they might as well have the shock now, as later on. For Mosley, whether you regard him as a limb of Satan or a potential saviour of his nation, is one of the three most dynamic personalities in the Empire to-day. And the men he has inspired are animated by something akin to a religious faith. Yet he receives less publicity in England, than the colour of Miss Marlene Dietrich's finger-nails.

It is to remedy this incongruous state of affairs that I am writing this chapter. And for no other reason.

### v

The headquarters of the British Union of Fascists are in Sanctuary Buildings, Westminster. A few minutes northwards lies Victoria Street, which ends in a shambles of Victorian architecture. A few minutes westwards takes you to the grey towers of Westminster Abbey. And a few minutes southwards to some of the worst slums in London. Sanctuary Buildings, therefore, occupies what might be called a psychologically strategic position.

If you stand for a few minutes by the entrance to the building you will observe, coming in and out, a constant

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procession of young men who suggest, by their bearing, that they are soldiers. Actually, these young Fascists are drawn from every profession, and the only man in uniform whom you will meet in the building is the doorkeeper. Uniform, as you may remember, is forbidden by law.

In the ante-room is a table covered with copies of the Fascist magazine *Action*. Over the mantelpiece hangs a large photograph of Sir Oswald Mosley, in a black shirt. It is, in my opinion, a very unfortunate photograph. It looks haughty and rather pompous. Mosley, however strongly . . . even passionately . . . we may question some of his principles, is neither. In order to try to convince you of this, we will go and meet him.

We are led to a small office at the back of the building. As the door opens Mosley rises and greets us. If we are out for anything sensational in his appearance or his surroundings, we shall be disappointed. There are no 'heils', no placards summoning us to 'down the Jews!' All we see is a tall, powerfully-built Englishman of about forty, good-looking, with aquiline features. He is dressed conventionally in a dark grey suit.

The most tell-tale thing about a woman is her mouth, and the most tell-tale thing about a man is his voice. No amount of cosmetic can turn mean lips into kind ones, and no amount of histrionic talent can give the ring of sincerity to the voice of a man who does not believe what he is saying.

I mention this because it has an important bearing on some of the more astonishing things that Mosley said to me. For instance:

'I know for a fact that if I came to power I could make

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the peace of Europe in three months. I know that, as a precise *fact*, with every detail that this fact implies.'

You may dismiss this statement as the raving of a lunatic. Most people will. But you may *not* dismiss it as an example of playing to the gallery, or vote-catching. For if you had heard Mosley say it, you would have known that to him it was a simple truth.

And again, you must be reminded of that tone of voice (though you may think him mad), when you read the dialogue which ensued from one of the first questions I put to him.

Because the idea of Fascism ever really gripping England seemed to me so remote, I asked him:

'Are you an optimist?'

He replied:

'It is not a question of being an optimist or a pessimist. Either we must win, or it is the end, not only of this country, but of Western civilization. Of that there is absolutely no question. We all know it. That is why we were able to start this movement, which, from every worldly point of view, was a suicide squad. But it is a squad which, somehow or other, survived. Because we have faith.' He gave me a faint smile. 'Faith is not a thing you measure in terms of optimism or pessimism, is it? It *is*.'

'You see,' he said, '*we have advanced as a religious movement.*'

He folded his hands and stared into the fire. He seemed to be speaking to himself. 'People have joined us, not as they would join a political party, but as they would join a church. And that is the spirit in which we have accepted them. We have said to them . . . "by joining us you will get

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nothing . . . except victimization. We have no money to offer you, no easy jobs of any kind. On the contrary, we must warn you that you may even lose the job you now hold, if your employer guesses that you are with us. We can give you no glory, because we are boycotted by the press. We cannot even offer safety. Do you still want to come?"'

He turned back to me. 'When a man says "yes" to those questions, he is a man whom I can trust. Ten men like that are stronger than ten thousand who automatically vote, at the elections, for the member who they think is most likely to pander to their own interests. Ten men like that will be heard, and listened to, long after the ten thousand who shout them down have been forgotten. And I have not ten men . . . but thousands. Look at that map.'

He pointed to the map of England which lay behind him. It was beflagged from Newcastle to Penzance. Each flag represented an organization of British Fascists . . . perhaps not large, certainly not rich, but welded by a religious faith. To that fact I can testify. Anybody who has ever gone to any of the smaller Fascist meetings . . . not the sensational meetings of the Leader but the ordinary gatherings of the rank and file . . . will find himself in the presence of men and women to whom this creed is a matter of life and death.

And that, whether we like it or not, is something *new* in British politics.

### V I

It is from no desire to make Fascist propaganda that I give the following figures. It is rather from a desire to wake

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up the British public to a fact of urgent importance, which the press is consistently concealing from them.

Observe the similarity between the growth of Hitler's movement and that of Mosley. In 1928 Hitler polled 2.7 per cent. In 1930, when the snowball had got well under way, he polled 19 per cent (which incidentally gave him 106 members in the Reichstag).

In East London, in the L.C.C. elections last March, the Blackshirts who had previously polled only 2 per cent, polled 19 per cent . . . a percentage advance exactly equal to that of Hitler's, in a period of almost exactly the same duration.

We all know that L.C.C. elections cannot be judged by the same standards as national elections, but that can afford little comfort to the anti-Fascists, for the L.C.C. elections have shown persistent *Socialist* gains at a period when, nationally, the country has voted Conservative. In this light, the Blackshirt percentage becomes even more surprising, especially when we consider that it comes from an area which, with its large Jewish population, is presumably more hostile than most.

The percentage becomes positively startling when we take into consideration the fact that the progress of the British Fascist movement coincided with an industrial *boom*, whereas both the Italian and German movements coincided with (if they were not actually created by) an economic *collapse*.

Mussolini marched to Rome through a land in which the roar of the industrial machines had been drowned by the roar of the crowds who were swarming to smash them.

Hitler marched to the Reichstag through a land of

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famine. The full effects of the Treaty of Versailles . . . the most hideous record that history has ever preserved of man's inhumanity to man . . . were not really evident till ten years after the guns had ceased to fire. It needed ten years of bludgeoning, of starvation, of insult, and exploitation, to make Germany rise in torment to break the bonds with which the Lilliputian puppets of France had shackled her. And Hitler's voice was never seriously heeded, outside the confines of Munich, till the end of 1928.

But British Fascism had none of these allies of misfortune. It started in October 1932. The crash was over. The chimneys were beginning to smoke again. The queues round the soup-kitchens were thinning. A watery sun . . . and as long as gold continues to dominate industry, the economic sun will always be pretty watery . . . was beginning to shine again. In spite of this, Fascism (which is a revolutionary creed) advanced and is still advancing.

As Mosley said to me: 'We are attempting something which has only once been achieved in history before . . . the overthrow of an ancient, established regime, while it is still functioning.'

### V I I

What are the reasons for this advance . . . of which you will read not one word in the British press?

One of them lies in the personality of Mosley himself. If you had sat with me, in that little room, with the light slowly fading over the grey roofs outside, you would have realized that you were in the presence of a figure of tremen-

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dous *importance*. Some will say a figure of great danger, others of great promise. Most will say (and they are the people to whom these words are written) a figure whom we can ignore. The people who say that are making the biggest mistake of their lives.

One of the reasons for Mosley's importance is that he has had the courage to admit that there are occasions when a man should follow his instinct in preference to his intellect.

Mosley said to me:

'Two or three years ago, I said: "*I have had enough of the people who think . . . I am going out to get the people who feel.*"'

'That sentence', he added, 'cost me the friendship of almost all "intellectual" society. Even old friends like Harold Nicolson felt that they really couldn't stomach any statement so deplorable. So they left me. But I don't regret it. It had cleared the air.'

This desire to 'clear the air', to cleanse national life as a preliminary to rebuilding the national economy and remoulding foreign policy, is a fundamental of Fascist policy . . . at least, as it is publicly expressed, although we may have our own opinions as to the efficacy of the Fascist broom. But there can be no two opinions as to the sincerity of Mosley's confidence in his ability to do so, and quite frankly, I wish there were a single parliamentarian with a quarter of his quiet conviction.

Listen to his views on world peace. They differ, somewhat markedly, from the popular illusion of Fascist fire and fury.

'After the world war', he said, 'we all had grandiose views of the Super-State that was to spring up on the ruins of Europe. I needn't go into that, except to point out that

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in those days I quoted Tennyson quite as glibly as any of the Wilsonians, with their parliament of man and their federation of the world. Then, as we know, everything broke down. America departed. Germany departed. Japan departed.'

'But the League went on', he said, 'cynically waving a flag to which it was no longer entitled, in celebration of a cause in which it no longer believed, to defend a fortress which it had already deserted.' His voice deepened, and he used a phrase which is significant. '*It was the restoration of the devil, in the guise of God.*'

'Of course', he went on, 'it was the old story of the Holy Alliance, over again, except that in this case the alliance was more corrupt and more dangerous. But that again need not concern us. What I wish to emphasize is this (and it is the whole essence of Fascist policy). Everything which is to flourish and to endure must grow from the roots upwards, and that peace . . . world peace . . . is no exception to this rule.'

'You think that sounds vague? It isn't. It's merely . . . well, big. Tremendous. It means that the first thing you have to do is to restore decency to national life. To *cleanse* the nation. And when we have done our own job, to erect a superstructure of Union. For union of the spirit is fundamental, and it can only come from a creed held in common. And that creed is Fascism.'

It would take far too long to endeavour to compress into a few pages a whole system of morals, economics, international relations, and social philosophy. If you are interested, you might read Mosley's own book, *The Greater Britain*. Do what you like with it. Riddle it with criticism.

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Laugh at it. But do not ignore it. For the views it sets forward are held, with religious conviction, by thousands of Englishmen who are prepared to die for them.

### V I I I

But I am not prepared to die for them.

And the reason I am not prepared to die for them is because I once saw a photograph of a very frightened little Jewish child, standing outside the door of a school in Germany, from which it had been locked out by the 'Aryan' authorities.

And because Mosley, through an ironical twist of circumstances, has been compelled by the powerful forces of Jewry, to adopt a modified form of anti-Semitism.

It is not quite as simple as that, of course. But it expresses my own point of view.

I am well aware that what I am about to say will lose me friends left and right. It will lose me friends among the Jews, and among the anti-Semites; in fact I can think of nobody who will agree with it. But though honesty may not be the best policy, it is certainly the least fatiguing . . . and when one reaches the end of any book one is always glad to avoid unnecessary fatigue.

So here's for it.

My own objection to anti-Semitism arises from a hatred of hurting the *little* people. It is difficult to write what I mean without sounding sentimental. I am really trying to say that the photograph of that small child (who had a horrible hook nose) moved me much more than the news

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that a number of great financiers had been beaten up or that a number of Jewish multiple drapers had been forced to close their doors.

The picture which haunts me, keeps me awake at night, is the picture of children . . . puzzled, frightened children . . . staring up in alarm at great placards bearing the words 'Juden Nicht Erwünscht'. Starting in terror when a brickbat, thrown by an Aryan, buzzes past their heads. Saying to themselves . . . 'What is the matter with me?' 'What have I done?' 'What does it mean?'

I feel that sometimes at night they must bare their chests and search, by candlelight, for the scars of some horrible disease. That they must draw their fingers over their bodies, in bewilderment, run their hands through their hair, press their little faces to the mirror, asking always . . . 'Why? Why? What is it that sets me apart? Where is the mark of the beast?'

No man with a spark of humanity in him can be an anti-Semite, when his brain paints such pictures for him. Not only pictures of children, but of all the other little people of this mournful race. The old women whose youth was darkened by the shadows of soldiers standing on guard outside the windows of some house in a Polish village. The old men who have saved and saved, through years of honourable practice, only to find, in the end, that their savings are confiscated by an arbitrary judgment of a hostile court. The young students, who have scorned delights and lived laborious days, to be greeted at the end of it all by a row of locked doors and the hope, that if they are lucky, they may be able to keep body and soul together by sweeping the crossings.

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It is these little people who make the horrors of anti-Semitism, more than the Einsteins, the Thomas Manns, the Rheinhardts and the Bergners.

### I X

Let us imagine, however, that we can forget all feelings of humanity. Let us regard anti-Semitism from a purely utilitarian point of view. Is it for a moment conceivable that the British Empire, which is of all institutions the most precarious and the most ramshackle, could possibly tear out the Jews from its midst, and continue to survive? The briefest consideration assures us that if it attempted such a drastic surgical operation, it would crash in ruins. It would crash as certainly as an ancient building on which the ivy had for centuries encroached. You may call the ivy a parasite. You may suggest that it has stretched its tendrils too deeply into the crevices, that it was eating into the very fabric of the stone. That may be true. But try to tear it away, and you will bring down, not only the ivy, but the entire structure.

Would it not be better to trim the ivy?

I do not think that the metaphor is either inappropriate or far-fetched. The ivy is a parasite. The Jew is a parasite. But the ivy, on an ancient structure, is not only a parasite but a support. And the Jew, in an ancient structure like the British Empire, is not only an alien but an asset.

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### x

I have expressed my own deep antipathy to anti-Semitism with a certain vigour because bitter experience has taught me that a modern journalist who does not constantly scream hysterical abuse of the whole German people is at once labelled an anti-Semite.

This experience has been mine on more than one occasion. When I printed, in a newspaper, the fact that I had recently attended, in Hitler's Germany, a performance in one of Germany's largest music-halls, where a packed house of Nazis loudly applauded a show in which every single item was Jewish, I was called a liar. There was no argument about it. The modern intellectual does not debate. He denounces.

He denounced me again when I reported the fact that as lately as last September I had observed, pouring out from the synagogue at Nuremberg, an immense congregation of Jews, cheerful and prosperous, who had got into their motor cars (which were so numerous that they were holding up the traffic), and whirled off to their respective homes. 'Such a sight is impossible in modern Germany,' they cried. 'No Jew can worship in public. No Jew can hold up the traffic. You are a liar.'

Personally I do not see why a Jew should not hold up the traffic in modern Germany as often, and as firmly, as a Gentile. But that is not the point. The point is that on this question of anti-Semitism it seems impossible for most people to talk anything which even remotely resembles common sense.

The most important thing about anti-Semitism is the

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simple fact of its existence. It has existed since the very beginnings of civilization. Periodic outbreaks of it have occurred in every form of society, under every form of government, in every climate, and in every variety of economic circumstance.

If you read Chapter One of the Second Book of Moses, called Exodus, you will receive a sharp reminder that anti-Semitism was in full blast under the Pharaohs.

*'And the King of Egypt spake to the Hebrew midwives, and he said, "When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, if it be a son, then ye shall kill him."*'

Compared to which, even the thunders of Herr Streicher, in *Der Sturmer* seem mild.

You cannot explain away a phenomenon so ancient and so widespread. The dirty smoke of anti-Semitism has blown round the world since the dawn of time. You cannot deny that there must be some fire.

You cannot simply shrug your shoulders and talk vaguely about barbarism or religious prejudice. A great many men who are not at all barbarous, and who care nothing about religion, are anti-Semitic.

Mosley, in talking of this subject to me, said, 'We do not attack the Jew for what he is but for what he does'.

I observed that this was not an intellectual argument.

He smiled and said that he could have told me that himself. He added, however, that it became an intellectual argument if a sufficiently overwhelming force of evidence was produced in its favour. He began to give me some of this evidence. His first point, I remember was a proof that eighty per cent of the fraudulent bankruptcies in the last ten years in this country have been Jewish.

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But since I abhor anti-Semitism I would suggest that the way to deal with the disruptive element of Jewry, and the way, incidentally, to help and protect the large Jewish element whose members are of real value to the Empire, is not to knock all Jews indiscriminately on the head, but to put our own laws in order. If the bankruptcy laws, for example, are so loose that they offer an irresistible temptation to unprincipled Jews (and unprincipled Gentiles), it should not be beyond the wit of our legislation to amend them. If they are incapable of such a simple solution, I should agree with one of my Jewish friends who observed that, 'people who were so stupid deserved to be robbed'. It may be a Jewish point of view, but I have a sneaking sympathy for it.

One could write for ever about this subject, so I will say only one thing more. Which is that Mosley's 'solution' of the Jewish problem, though it seems to me to be quite impossible, is *not* an inhuman solution. He wishes gradually without persecution, and with full compensation, to give them a chance of becoming a nation . . . in some other part of the world. Quite frankly, the 'solution' seemed to me to be so incapable of realization that I did not ask him where he would send them. Obviously it would not be Palestine, which has already reached saturation point . . . (though you can't write *that* without being called an anti-Semite!) And again obviously, however genuine one's desire to avoid persecution, it would be impossible to execute such a scheme without it.

All I wish to point out is that if Mosley were ever to come to power, there would be no pogroms. He might even have the genius to find a solution to this problem . . . which,

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remember, has baffled the ingenuity of mankind since the beginnings of history.

At the moment, however, the fact that he has been forced by his enemies into a position where he must either be anti-Semitic or perish, seems to me to be one of the major tragedies of our time. For he is the only man I know who has in him the qualities of that hero for whom this country has waited so long, and waited in vain.



## CHAPTER XXI

### THE BITTER END

#### I

It is with no ironical intention that I ask you to believe that this book has been written out of a deep love of England.

Nor is it with any ironical intention that I also ask you to believe that it has been written out of a deep love of peace.

To many it will seem that the author, if he has any love of England, has been successful in concealing it. It will also seem that if he had any love of peace he is marching with determination in a direction completely opposite to that of most pacifists.

These accusations must be faced. It is particularly important for me to face them, as I am the author of a book called *Cry Havoc!*, published five years ago. It is not too much to say that this book had a certain influence on pacifist thought in Europe. It was translated into every European language except the languages of the dictators. It was made compulsory in hundreds of Imperial schools. Authors of the eminence of the Bengal Lancer rushed out books in reply to it. And a spark from its pages started the conflagration which blazed, for over a year, on the front pages of the American newspapers, as the secrets of the armament manufacturers were dragged into the light.

I do not regret this. Five years ago, in the utterly different world in which we were then living, in a world where there

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was still a hope for the League, still a hope for disarmament, still a hope of some form of international co-operation . . . in that remote and almost unrecognizable era, *Cry Havoc!* was timely. In that brief silence before the storm its voice was heard. There seemed a chance that some people might even heed it. It was not for me to know that it was so shortly to be drowned in the thunder of a thousand guns.

All the same, I could not write *Cry Havoc!* to-day. It would be like waving a fan in the face of an advancing cloud of poison-gas.

The profound loathing and horror of war which made me write that book is, if possible, stronger in me than ever. I still know, as well as you know, that war settles nothing. For every problem it solves, it creates a hundred new problems. For every pound it puts into one man's pocket, it takes a hundred out of another's. For every act of heroism, of nobility, that it may bring forth . . . (and it would be senseless to deny that some men, in battle, have reached to spiritual heights which they would never otherwise have attained) . . . it engenders a hundred acts of squalor and bestiality.

To bring forth a few flowers it makes a dung-heap of the world. To cause a moment's peace it makes a million deserts.

And yet, I now believe that there are some things worth fighting for.

To this 'loathesome necessity', as Lord Baldwin described it, have I come, in company with a large number of other

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pacifists. I do not see why we should be ashamed of ourselves. We have not been inconsistent. We do not pretend that war is anything but legalized murder. But we do at least see that something very precious may vanish altogether from the world unless we are prepared to defend it. And that something is the English spirit.

I said, a moment ago, that I believe there were some things worth fighting for. What I really meant, of course, is that there is one thing worth fighting for . . . and that is the British Empire. Nothing could give the intellectual an easier target on which to exercise his satire than this suggestion. The target becomes even easier when we add that, even to a pacifist, the Empire is worth defending. It becomes a positively pitiable target when we make the final statement that it is worth defending, not only for the benefits it bestows upon the inhabitants of this island, but upon the immense range of races that are united in its sway.

That sounds like Rudyard Kipling at his worst. 'In a moment,' the intellectual may well observe, 'you will begin to quote "If".'

There are worse things to quote than 'If', in England in 1938. But we are not concerned with 'ifs', but with 'whys', and 'whats'.

Why should it be possible for a pacifist to feel justified in defending the Empire by force?

And what do we mean by the English spirit?

Let us try to answer these two questions very briefly.

My answer to the first question is highly personal and may strike many people as ridiculous. But perhaps the main reason why I want to see a strong, resurgent England, is because I believe that there is less cruelty in the English

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character than in any other national psychology. It is not for nothing that there is a proverb, in many languages, which tells us that: 'England is every dog's spiritual home'. It is easy to laugh at this trait, to point to fat English squires with their bulldogs and old English maids with their pugs. But it is, to me, a very lovable trait. A nation which shows so much solicitude for the dumb creatures of the world is a nation to which power may be entrusted without misgiving.

Give an Englishman a rifle, and he will not run amok. Give him a whip, and he will be loth to use it. Give him authority, and he will make no unnecessary parade of it.

The example of India is, surely, sufficient proof of this, if any were needed. The inhabitants of India number 352,837,778. The total English population is 293,950. Three hundred thousand to police, administer, supervise and control three hundred million! To be precise, one Englishman for a thousand Indians. It is an unanswerable retort to the trouble makers of the Left who talk about English oppression in India. If we needed a quarter of the spies, soldiers, and police to control the natives of India as the Kremlin needs to control its own Russian people, we should be obliged to keep a standing army of several millions.

And that really brings us to the second question, which is a pendant to the first. What do we mean by the English spirit?

The answer is best given by a simple little example. The English spirit is the spirit that animated a cheerful young A.D.C., in Cairo, as he walked down a street and encountered a crowd of rioting students during the worst troubles of recent years. The spirit that kept him walking towards them, whistling when he didn't feel at all like whistling,

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swinging his hands when he felt much more like swinging his fists. The spirit that guided him to go up to the leader, who was standing in front of his gang, in a menacing stillness, and ask him the way to the Museum of Antiquities.

For a moment the danger lasted. Sticks were raised. Knives were drawn. Someone shouted: 'Down with England!'

'All right,' retorted the A.D.C. 'Have it your own way. Down with England! Only I do wish you chaps would tell me the way to the Museum of Antiquities.'

They showed him the way. They parted friends.

That is what I call the English spirit. It is something unique in the world. It is of vital importance.

And that is why I deplore the symptoms of its decay which we have been compelled to confess in this book.

### I I I

There has been so much that is destructive in this book that we might well use our last few pages for some constructive proposals.

The one quality that is vitally important for modern England is Foresight. The intellectual would call it Plan. Plan, however, is a suspect word. It has been adopted by bureaucrats of the Right and of the Left, as a convenient sop to their patient publics. If you inform your public that you have a Plan, and that it will take five years to complete, the odds are that you will be believed. And at the end of five years' chaos, everybody will be so bewildered that nobody

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will realize that the existing purgatory bears absolutely no resemblance to the paradise that was promised. And another five-year Plan will be hailed as a further triumph for 'Democracy' or 'Aryanism' or whatever the prevalent mania may be.

It is unlikely that the British public will be led by the nose in this manner. But it is quite vital, as we have already observed, that we should cultivate Foresight, and that we should obey the injunctions, however uncomfortable, which such a gift imposes upon its possessors.

Consider, first, this question of war.

A pacifist who has at last been forced to admit that there are some things which are worth keeping by force will naturally have a viewpoint which differs considerably from that of the professional soldier. He will be more interested in the armour than the spear. He will welcome the invention of a new gas-mask as much as he deplores the invention of a new gas. In spite of the assurances of the air force that the only way to defend is to attack, he will first be inclined to concentrate his energies on the provision of adequate anti-aircraft measures.

It is here that he will realize the astonishing lack of Foresight which is the particular curse of his country . . . not only of his government, but of the whole people. We have already seen that the public, in spite of every warning, in spite of full knowledge of the gehenna into which they may be plunged, are inclined to treat the problem of air-defence with a levity which is inexplicable. I did not realize the full extent of this levity until, at the very time that I was writing this chapter, I received a letter which I make no excuse for quoting. Here it is:

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*'Dear Mr. Nichols,*

*'You are doubtless aware that the War Office are endeavouring to acquire the land in the vicinity of Blakeney Point, Norfolk, for the purpose of an Anti-Aircraft Battery Station.*

*'Do you know Blakeney Point? There is a lovely bird sanctuary in the vicinity. What effect will their . . .! guns have upon the birds? It is a howling shame that the War Office should be allowed even to suggest such a thing.'*

It so happened that I received this letter on a day when the peace of Europe seemed to be hanging by an even slenderer thread than usual. It was also a day when every newspaper carried big headlines about a debate in the House of Commons which had revealed, with alarming clarity, our complete unpreparedness in the matter of war-time food supplies.

The letter therefore seemed to me to show a spirit of appalling levity in the face of great danger.

I was aware that the War Office had not always chosen its sites for anti-aircraft batteries with an eye that was exclusively directed to their aesthetic values in the landscape. I had even joined in the public protest, a year before, at the proposal which was likely to threaten an ancient swannery. (As it has turned out, the swans seem to like it very much, and continue to flourish exceedingly.)

But I also felt that there are times in a nation's history when we must admit, with reluctance, that aesthetic considerations must take second place. Such a time seemed to be now. And so I published the letter.

I published it in a Sunday newspaper with a large circulation. I also published a commentary, in which I expressed

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my disgust at the mentality of an Englishman who put the comfort of a few birds above the lives of his fellow citizens.

I pointed out that an anti-aircraft battery was of its nature, defensive. That it was no more a 'menace' to other nations than a supply of gas-masks, or a reserve of canned foods.

I was greeted by a storm of protest.

Bird-lovers from all over the country wrote to me in terms of such abuse that one would imagine that my favourite occupation was poisoning parrots. I was called a hypocrite, a militarist, a turn-coat. I had no sense of beauty, no sense of decency, no sense of shame. I had 'turned my back on the poor dumb creatures' . . . a curious description of the inhabitants of a bird sanctuary.

Since these letters formed a typical cross-section of public opinion, it is to be presumed that the readers of this book will also swell the tide of abuse.

That cannot be helped. However, I would say (not in my own defence, but in defence of the War Office), that since this matter was ventilated I have learned, from the harassed guardians of our public defence, that my little storm is only a minor example of the hurricane which is created when any attempt is made to get the British public to take any elementary precautions.

Wherever the War Office wish to erect an anti-aircraft battery (which may one day be the means of saving thousands from agonies of death and mutilation) it is always too near *something*. If it is not too near a bird sanctuary, it is too near a 'beauty spot', or too near a public school, or too near a factory, or too near a 'holiday resort'. One gathers that the only place where the War Office could, without arousing hostile comment, erect a battery, would be in the Outer

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Hebrides. And even then, one expects, there would be a number of people to protest, on the grounds that the amenities of life among the seagulls would, in the event of war, be seriously endangered.

It is strange that these people cannot realize that if they had their way there might come a day, in the not so distant future, when the cry of the seagulls and the song of the thrush would be the only sounds that echoed over the smoking desolation that had once been England.

### I V

This lack of Foresight is to be found in every aspect of English life.

We have time for one more example . . . unemployment.

If we had Foresight we should be forced to admit to ourselves (as I endeavoured to point out in a previous chapter), that unemployment, in this highly industrialized country, has come to stay, and that there is a possibility (to put it mildly) that it may increase. And one of the first things which a far-sighted man would do, realizing that the Age of Leisure was upon us, and that we were completely unprepared for it, would be to try to visualize what was to be the life of a permanent workless population of several millions. And having done so, he would come to certain very striking conclusions. To take the simplest first, he would come to the conclusion that these permanently workless millions (which his Foresight had pointed out to him) would very rapidly deteriorate, physically, unless they were given ample opportunity to breathe fresh air and to exercise their bodies, in

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other words, to play some sort of game. There will be a great many games to play in the Age of Leisure.

But where will they be played?

Our chain of argument is so simple that it will strike many people as jejune. That does not invalidate either its urgency or its truth.

When our man of Foresight asks this childish question, 'Where are the workless of the future to play those games which they most certainly must play, unless they are to degenerate into mental and physical wrecks?' he will be instantly brought up with a shock. He will learn that if one per cent of our unemployed all decided to play games, on the same day, in our great cities, nearly ninety-nine and three quarters per cent would find it impossible to do so. In other words, there is accommodation, at the moment, for just over one-fourth of one per cent.

If he carried his inquiries farther he would learn that even this despicable proportion is being slowly lowered. He would find that young clerks have to wait all through the summer for a single game of tennis. That factory lads, anxious to form football teams, have to content themselves with kicking a ball about in a back yard. That all the natural vigour and physical energy of British youth is being slowly sapped because the land speculator and the jerry builder, working with an energy that is perpetually spurred by the snores of the national and municipal authorities, are rapidly encroaching on the few remaining green spaces round our great cities.

Our man of Foresight, I hope, would lose no time in joining the National Playing Fields Association. This association, which is fighting against almost overwhelming odds,

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is one for which no praise can be too high. It is carrying out a work of paramount importance, and history will one day record the debt which we owe it.

In the meantime, history is being written. With a swift and ruthless pen. It is being written in bricks and mortar, which are closing in on the younger generation, with terrifying rapidity. It is being written in the sharp lines of discontented faces . . . faces that will one day be in the vanguard of English progress, or in the first rank of English retreat.

Which is it to be?

Well, is there anything wrong about that argument?

No?

Except, you may add, that it is boringly obvious.

Maybe. I can't help being boringly obvious. If the house is on fire it is, no doubt, boringly obvious to suggest . . . in even the politest tones . . . that a few buckets of water might act as a deterrent. To superior young men, observing the blaze, and finding pleasure in the clash of orange flames against a scarlet sunset, such suggestions must be tiresome in the extreme. 'Naturally, a bucket of water would be a deterrent,' they agree with a yawn.

And when you ask them who is to fetch the bucket of water, they say . . . 'Go away, you bore me.'

I may bore them. And I may go away, in search of water. But I shall come back. For I must repeat, *ad nauseam*, that it is an example of appalling apathy that a matter of such vital importance . . . (as our man of Foresight has agreed) . . . should be left to an overworked body of patriotic volunteers.

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The problems of a great empire cannot be settled in a single book, even if it were written by a pen a hundred times more able than mine.

But at least they can be *indicated*, if one simply tries very hard, to learn as much as possible, to look forward as clearly as possible, and to be as honest as possible.

That is really all I have tried to do.

I am not hopeless of our future. But I am profoundly anxious of it.

We have genius, but it is dissipated in vain excursions. We have kindness . . . but without strength, of what can our kindness avail? We are realists, but we are caught in a curious miasma. A nation of shopkeepers, we have lost our capacity to add up a bill, and we have forgotten that one day we must render an account.

It is with no ironical intention . . . to quote the opening phrases of this chapter . . . that I ask you to believe that this book has been written out of a deep love of England.

It is rather with the hope that England may once more be worthy of Canning's immortal eulogy . . . that she may once more become an England who will save herself by her exertions, and Europe by her example.





